



Demon Lord, Retry!

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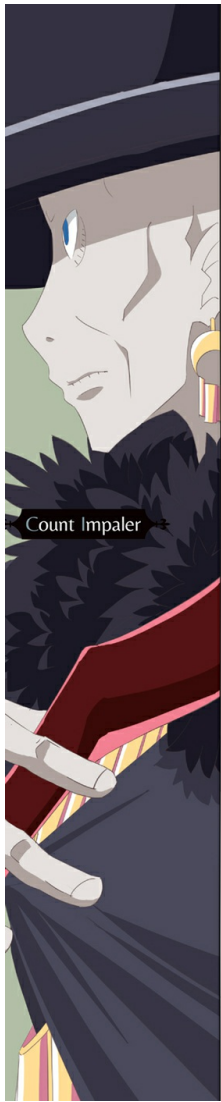
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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Chapter Seven: Forces Collide](#)

[Father and Daughter](#)

[Akira Ono, the Final Boss](#)

[Postscript](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Chapter Seven: Forces Collide

The Military Leader and the Village of Rabbi — Part 1

Harts opened his eyes, his vision graced with a shower of sunbeams piercing through the treetops and through the window. He found himself in white bedsheets, looking up at the spotless ceiling.

(I'm alive...) Harts realized as various fragments of memories replayed in his mind. What started with the clash of the Tzardom and the Satanists became a hellish battleground, even dragging an ancient devil and mock-angel into the mix. (My legs...) He carefully tried to move his legs, the same that allowed him to sprint through numerous battlefields and decimate countless foes, only to find that he could feel them both. He had the vivid memory of them being destroyed, but now he felt no pain. Not even the dull aches that he often felt which seemed to signify the inevitability of aging. (Is this *his* doing, too...?) A shiver ran down his spine as he recalled the events involving the man who disintegrated the Tzardom trope with lightning bolts that resembled divine wrath. The same man who blew up that all-too-powerful mock-angel with a single blow.

(No wonder he calls himself the Demon Lord...) Harts grinned in self-deprecation. He really *was* the Demon Lord, after all. (No one believed such rumors. Even I didn't pay them any mind.) He had only ever considered the Demon Lord a sketchy figure that tried to weasel power out of Luna or the Madam. Such lowlifes were rampant in any time or place. Those scam artists were destined for tragic ends, either disappearing from the limelight or this world altogether. This time, however, things were different.

(He's the real Demon Lord. The Fallen Angel Lucifer has returned from the realm of myths...) A dark cloud swept over Harts. Not he, nor anyone else at this point, could possibly imagine what this would mean for Holylight. Besides, he had something more pressing on his mind. (I don't think anyone can stop them...) The Holy Maiden Luna had awakened her potential and vanquished that powerful devil. Combined with the Madam's political influence, abundant

wealth, and powerful connections, the eastern and southern parts of Holylight were as good as theirs. The Demon Lord alone more than made up for their lack of an army. Harts had no doubt in his mind that all of his best men combined would be reduced to dust in the blink of an eye by that walking, talking supernatural force that called a mock-angel a 'hunk of metal.' (What can I do...?) He held the destiny of not only his entire clan, but of every militaristic noble and their families in his hands. Harts sat up and closed his eyes to contemplate. This wasn't a problem with a simple solution.

Just then, the man with such a solution gave a rhythmic knock on his door.

"Hey, old man. How're you feeling?"

"Sir Tahara, was it...? I feel surprisingly well, thanks to you."

"Good to hear. You have to conduct the whole army with those hands, after all."

Finally, Harts realized that his twisted arms were healed as good as new. He had been too preoccupied by the fact that his trusty legs were healed. (My arms, too...?) At this point, a delayed sense of fear curdled within Harts. What sort of power could provide such incredible healing?

Sensing that, Tahara nonchalantly answered, "We've got a good doctor. Her *tendencies* aside, she knows how to fix people."

"Doctor..."

"Your old friend Sambo got treated here, too."

"Now that you... mention it..." At the time, Harts couldn't stand the fact that he owed a favor to the Madam, his political enemy. Now, he realized that he owed a favor to someone much more dangerous. "I have a few questions for you, Sir."

"Hm? If I got the answers, I'll give them to you." Tahara lit the cigarette in his mouth without the slightest show of bedside manners.

"How far along is your coup d'etat...?"

"That's quite the icebreaker," Tahara answered with the same old grin and took a long drag of his cigarette, despite Hart's piercing question.

Harts observed Tahara's expression and movements from inhale to exhale, but he was the portrait of composure. Harts, a skilled strategist, was now sure of one thing. (A coup is nothing out of the ordinary for them...) In fact, it seemed as if it was an everyday occurrence, or so Harts thought. They took on overthrowing governments with the same attitude as eating breakfast in the morning. Why wouldn't anyone eat breakfast in the morning? Harts also sensed that he would gain nothing by attempting any sort of bluff or deal with Tahara.

More accurately, Tahara had no grandiose objective like a coup d'état. He only knew that there was no way the Demon Lord of the Empire would remain content running a remote village. His unquenchable ambition would turn to the entire world sooner or later. It was also Hakuto Kunai's motive to secure any and all power and maintain that which he seized, then expand his rule by using anything at his disposal as stepping stones. In all senses of the term, a coup would be a day-to-day thing for Tahara.

"Don't have to blow things out of proportion, old man," he jested. "Don't you know that water flows in the path of least resistance...?" Suddenly, Tahara's grin had been wiped away. To him, the Demon Lord gaining power was an inevitable course of nature.

Harts was astounded by Tahara's brazenness. "What do you plan... to do with my country...?" he asked through gritted teeth.

"Don't ask me. The Secretary's got his own plans," Tahara answered as usual. He wasn't refusing to answer, but simply didn't grasp the entirety of the Demon Lord's plan... or so he thought. In reality, the Demon Lord had no elaborate strategy or forethought here. None whatsoever. Even Tahara couldn't deduce what didn't exist. In fact, the feeling of being left in the dark had only accelerated Tahara's overestimation of the Demon Lord. If the Demon Lord had known any of this, he would have *begged* for Tahara to just chill.

"I'll change my question..." Harts said. "What do you think of it, Sir?"

"Huh? Me? I just want my Great Angel to live in peace," Tahara answered with a straight face.

Harts was left utterly confused. "Great... Angel? Is that supposed to be a metaphor? Or a codename?"

“It’s my... sister.” Tahara said, staring into the distance with a gentle smile. His expression grew more amused as he seemed to imagine his reunion with her. Even Tahara’s infamous poker face didn’t stand a chance against the thought of his little sister.

“Your sister’s... the Great Angel? Are you trying to throw me off? Give me a straight answer, Sir.”

“I am, man. It’s the straightest answer there is. She’s all I got,” Tahara declared, almost offended. In truth, he had no other goal in life than for his sister Manami to live a peaceful life. In order for his sister to live comfortably and in peace, he had to set up an iron-tight rule on Holylight. He took pride in all of his construction projects because they were going to facilitate convenience and comfort for his sister. Moreover, it was only natural that Tahara strived for a total rule of this world and all of its nations without any seeds of a rebellion in order to maximize Manami’s safety.

“I don’t get it... I don’t understand what you’re saying, Sir...” Harts shook his head, exhausted. He couldn’t even tell if Tahara was trying to mislead him or brush the topic under the rug. As a level-headed man, Harts couldn’t very well understand that Tahara wanted to construct a single-nation rule over the world solely for his sister. Even if Tahara had said so outright, it would only confuse Harts more.

“I sent someone for old man Sambo. Just relax until you get picked up. Try the public bath.” Tahara walked out of the room with a wave of the hand.

Harts had barely understood a thing Tahara had said. He had no concept of a ‘public bath,’ and couldn’t imagine what it would be like or how he could relax in it. (What an elusive man... But he is the Demon Lord Lucifer’s right hand, beyond any doubt. He spoke of Sambo rather familiarly...) Harts gazed out the window, and utterly depleted, he let out a deep sigh. He was looking for a distraction outside, but found the most astonishing sight. “Am I really in *the* village of Rabbi...?” he muttered to himself. As far as he could recall, the village had been a desolate settlement of Bunnies in the middle of a fruitless wasteland. It had always been a forsaken land similar to the land of the militaristic nobles. But now, the streets were bustling with people, goods, and the frantic carriage traffic of a bona-fide trade port. Harts looked in the distance

beyond the village borders to find a chain of carriages extending into the horizon, each piled high with cargo. “What is happening in this village...?”

A gentle knock came from the door, and in came the figure behind the village’s metamorphosis: the empress of high society, the Madam herself.

“How are your injuries?”

“...Much better.”

“I’m glad you’re all right. I heard you fought valiantly.”

Harts didn’t respond, but looked down in thought. If the Madam had made such a comment on any of their previous encounters, Harts would have dismissed it as sarcasm. This time, however, it sounded genuine. Moreover, Harts realized that the Madam had lost a significant amount of weight since he last saw her. Harts was a noble, too. He had enough social etiquette to subtly compliment a woman’s appearance or attire, but the Madam’s appearance had changed much too dramatically. Her enormous silhouette, which previously overwhelmed anybody she stood across from, had become surprisingly thin. He was sure that she would be the talk of the party if she ever returned to high society with her current physique. Harts couldn’t help but remember the word his subordinate had used to describe the Madam’s move: ‘rehabilitation.’ Had she fallen too ill to eat?

“Forgive my intrusion... But are *you* well, Madam?”

The perceptive Madam immediately picked up on Harts’ implication. She brought her fan up to her mouth as a smile broke out. He had practically complimented her for losing so much weight. The comment carried more weight coming from Harts, the epitome of boorishness. “I’m perfectly healthy, don’t you worry. Yu checks on me every day.”

“I see...”

Prolonged silence came over the room. The pair had always been at each other’s throats, which wasn’t exactly conducive to small talk. While Harts had a million questions for the Madam, he stubbornly refused to speak up first. Ordinarily, silence would have remained until one of them left the other, or until they started a barrage of back-handed comments.

Today, however, the Madam quietly began conversation. “Thank you for protecting little Luna...”

“No need for your thanks, Madam. I am expected to protect the Holy Maidens,” Harts countered. In fact, Harts was only fulfilling his duty by fighting to protect Luna. He certainly didn’t expect any praise or gratitude from anyone for it.

“I still want to thank you. She is a dear friend of mine.”

Harts widened his eyes. He had expected the Madam to prop Luna up as the puppet symbol for their coup, but not to call Luna a friend. He couldn’t help but recall how Luna faced down the giant devil to protect an old friend. These thoughts only made things more difficult for Harts. His drive to stop their ambitious quest for power was deteriorating, somehow. “A friend, you say... What do you plan to do with the demi-human?”

“Little Eagle, you mean? She’s being dragged all over the village right now. Little Luna really wanted to show her off to everybody.” The Madam giggled, remembering how proud Luna was when she was first brought Eagle to the Hot Springs Resort.

“Our relationship with the Tzardom will only worsen. Worst case, there’ll be war.” Just as he said this, Harts regretted it. This wasn’t the topic he wanted to broach at all. The question he really wanted to ask was what the Demon Lord and the empress before him wanted to do with this country.

Much to his surprise, the Madam gave him something close to an answer. “I don’t know anything about a war. I only serve the will of the Demon Lord.”

“That’s quite the way to put it. You make it sound like you consider him your master...”

“Who among us could defy the Fallen Angel?”

“I—” Harts choked on his words. After witnessing the Demon Lord’s supernatural strength, he couldn’t imagine even one way in which he could defy the man. Even if he only considered the Demon Lord’s strength in combat, he failed to picture any force that could put up a fight. Barring the return of the Great Light who fought against Lucifer over the world in the days of old, any

form of resistance seemed pathetically futile... But that was in the realm of myths, far from reality. “What is he going to do with this country? How will he rule it...? Aren’t you afraid of that, Madam?”

“Rule, you say...?” The Madam imagined the nation under the Demon Lord’s rule. She pictured wells in every settlement, the people rejoicing over never having to worry about water again. Workers who went to the public bath every night, rinsing away their fatigue along with their grime. Then she imagined the expansive construction projects reaching every corner of Holylight. Her heart beat faster at the imagery. It was as if she was *living* a myth. Considering that sort of future as a reality, the Madam couldn’t believe how hopeless she felt over her fattening body not so long ago. What she used to consider a curse had been shriveling away in agony, screaming its swan song like an elegant tune to the Madam’s ears. She was ready to welcome the Demon Lord’s rule with open arms based on that factor alone, not to mention the elimination of poverty that it was sure to bring.

“I see... A very flourishing nation,” she answered after a period of careful consideration.

Harts had not expected that answer. “Flourish...? At the hand of the Demon Lord? The Fallen Angel?” Had the Madam gone insane? “Forgive me for saying so, but it seems you don’t know your history. In the days of old, the Fallen Angel ruled the night, creating a hellish world where Hellions thrived. The people yearned for light, long awaiting for the morning to come.”

“Have you seen that world with your own eyes, Harts?”

“Ridiculous. I am talking about a time when gods—”

“I don’t concern myself with something that *might have* happened... What? Tens of thousands of years ago? I believe what I see with my own eyes.” The Madam’s response stung Harts. He had always relied on those he saw and trusted of his own volition, regardless of their status or power, and had survived deadly battlefields with them. He had survived by trusting the right people with his life. “If I end up paying for that judgment,” the Madam continued, “I have no one to blame but myself.”

Harts gazed up at the Madam. Despite her collected tone, her expression

shone with determination—passion that superseded any calculation of profit or self-preservation. (Why must *all* of them be so difficult to handle...?) Harts let out a long sigh, thirsting for a strong glass of wine. First he was moved by Luna saving her friend, then the Demon Lord’s right-hand man dropped the ‘Great Angel’ bomb, and now the Madam had hit him with a foolish, yet irrefutable, sentiment that reflected his own core beliefs. Harts was beginning to feel like a clown, and nearly burst out in laughter at how comical it all was. (What would be the point in fighting them...?) His resolve was wavering. In reality, the military nobles lived on unprofitable land, and had to keep one eye open against potential invasions from the Northern Nations. They had no business sticking their neck into any central conflict. As poor as they were, the military nobles had to harvest and store for the deadly winter ahead.

Harts climbed out of his bed and stood looking out the window. The hustle and bustle of the streets was composed of humans, Bunnies, and demi-humans, all naturally getting along. It wasn’t a sight he could have seen anywhere in Holylight before this. “He accepts the demi-humans, does he...?” Harts blurted out, partially because the silence between him and the Madam was growing uncomfortable.

“Firebrands, too.”

“Then devils and Hellbeasts, I suppose!? What is this *but* the return of the ruler of night?” Harts snarled, rather recklessly. If a myth was about to become reality, he didn’t know if he should lament over it or simply laugh and embrace it.

“If you’re so concerned about it,” the Madam proposed, “why don’t you see for yourself what his rule is like? The answer is right there in front of you. No need for any historical documents.”

“You make it sound so easy...” Harts grunted, but couldn’t counter the proposal with anything substantial. It was as if his mother had told him with a chuckle to stop theorizing about everything on paper and step outside of his own room. Surely, the Madam was one of the few people in the country who could be so blunt with Harts, the leader of the military nobles.



“That drove of carriages outside... Are those all what you’ve imported?”

“That’s right,” the Madam answered. “A lot of construction materials, recreational consumables, fabric, accessories...”

“It seems you’re ready to spend your entire fortune on him... Apparently, the Fallen Angel excels at charming women. Indeed, that part was left out of history.”

Unbothered by Hart’s sarcasm, the Madam nonchalantly made a proposal. “If you like, I’d be happy to show you around the village.”

(What is she scheming...!?) Harts thought. The Madam was much too important of a figure to offer herself as a mere tour guide, especially for her sworn political rival. It was a dangerous move on her part, and might have signaled to anyone from Holylight that the Madam had joined forces with Harts. Noble society was a war zone of status and appearance, after all. One wrong move, no matter how small, could cost a noble everything they’d worked for. Harts turned to the Madam, trying to dig into the heart of the matter. “The famous lady of House Butterfly as my tour guide? That’ll be quite the tale to bring home.” He reiterated her proposal, making sure she understood the implications of such an offer.

“Oh, I always thought you were rather insensitive, but it seems you have a soft spot, after all.” The Madam laughed, as if to tell Harts that she was well aware. Harts, on the other hand, was taken aback. “I’m sure you wouldn’t want to be seen like *that* . I’ve prepared a few things so you can make yourself presentable. Meet me outside when you’re ready,” the Madam commanded and left the room. As soon as she did, many maids filed into the room with all sorts of clothes and accessories in hand. Kyon and Momo were among them.

“She’s well prepared... Please exit the room, once you’ve dropped off what you have. Men of the north don’t need women to help them change.”

Many nobles had handmaidens serve them at every opportunity, from changing their clothes to feeding them, but not the military nobles. As a matter of fact, they counted on even their wives and children to contribute meaningfully. Whenever there was an invasion, drought, or cold front, they all shared the same fate, one way or another. Every single one of them had to

work together to survive. What use would someone be if the nobles treated them like interior decor? Moreover, angering a northern woman, who fought, cooked, *and* raised children, resulted in disastrous consequences. While the militaristic nobles were often looked down upon as being barbaric, most of them were wonderful husbands and fathers. This might have been a factor that contributed to why women with nowhere to go often found themselves in northern Holylight.

“Excuse us.” The maids obediently left the room, save for Kyon and Momo. They were wearing their farming gear today in lieu of their bunny suits, but still looked as adorable as ever.

“Can you two leave me, please? You don’t need to help me with anything.”

“We’ll just take the clothes you’re wearing... Hoppity.”

“We’ll wash them, hippity.”

As this was his first encounter with Bunnies, Harts raised a brow at their catchphrases. “No... I’ll do the laundry myself. Northern men take care of themselves.”

The Bunnies were dauntless, either by nature or because they had been desensitized by interacting with characters who were (in more ways than one) exceedingly extraordinary.

“Laundry’s easier when we do it together... Hoppity.”

“Now strip ’em, Grandpa. Hippity.”

“W-Wait a minute... Hey, you!” Harts protested, but Momo came around behind him and pulled his hospital gown loose. His upper body was suddenly revealed, displaying hardened muscles unbecoming of his age. At over sixty years old, his body was better built than that of most men in their prime.

“You have a lot of scars, Grandpa... Hoppity.”

“Crazy, hippity...”

His body was littered with cuts and scars, each of them familiar yet not noteworthy to Harts. Most men might have a greatly-exaggerated war story or two and enjoy proudly boasting their tales. For better or worse, Harts lacked

any talent for showmanship. While he excelled at leading and garnering unwavering support from his men, he was unlike the heroes sung in history who overturned entire nations with speech in order to gain support and cause big changes in the world. He was the kind of man who spoke through his work.

“They’re old... None of them hurt anymore.” Harts picked out a plain set of clothes and put them on. His scarred back exuded a sense of sorrowful loneliness and lost friends. The two Bunnies felt a strange sense of empathy for Harts. Many Bunnies were forced to leave the village of Rabbi because of the never-ending drought and ever-rising prices of Spell Stones. While Luna had drastically lowered their taxes upon her rule, the population they lost was never replenished. They were a village of demi-humans, after all.

“This would look better on you, Grandpa.” Kyon picked up a jacket and held it up to him.

“Hm?”

Twitching her bunny ears, Momo found a pair of pants that matched it. “How about this?” she asked.

“Looks good!”

“Wait a minute,” Harts interjected. “I’m too old for those. I’m perfectly content with these.”

“Look at this cool necklace!”

“No need to look too pretty, a lot of panthers right now.”

Harts realized that some things they said had faded from vernacular, but he didn’t mention it. The bigger problem was their brazenness. (So these are Bunnies,) Harts thought. (I’ve only heard that they were skilled at growing carrots...) Harts didn’t know what other skills they had, what their species liked or disliked, and never cared to know before. As a leader of the military nobles, he never had any room on his plate. The only other demi-humans he had met, which were very few in number, were fearsome warriors he’d encountered on the battlefield. Meanwhile, the pair of Bunnies swiftly changed Harts into the new set of clothes. “Wh-What are you doing...” Harts verbally reprimanded them, but didn’t physically stop them, lest he injure them. Most importantly, he

was in the land that belonged to the Holy Maiden Luna. If he would injure the residents of the village, it could very well turn into a political stain under the current climate.

As Harts was rendered immobile, the Bunnies excitedly finished changing him and admired their handiwork.

“It’s perfect... Hoppity!”

“D-Delicious... Delicious panther bait!”

While Harts couldn’t follow what the girls meant, he couldn’t help but be amazed at his reflection in the mirror. No longer was there an old, gruff knight, but a refined gentleman. The Bunnies had somehow styled his hair on top of changing his clothes. He was no longer angry, but simply amazed.

“Fine...” he muttered. “Some occasions call for dress like this, I suppose.” For decades, Harts had never bothered to pay any attention to his appearance. In a village far from his land, he felt like he could excuse himself a day of dressing up.

“We’ll take you to the Madam... Hoppity.”

“Hippity, hippity!”

The jolly pair took Harts out of the Field Hospital. He was astonished by the perfectly flat walls and floors of the building, as well as the mysterious equipment he passed by, but didn’t ask any questions. Sambo had already told him all about it.

The Madam, who had been waiting outside the entrance, widened her eyes at the sight of Harts. The old knight had cleaned up well, refining his intimidating presence that had always seemed to make people straighten their backs upon facing him. “Who’s this handsome gentleman...?” she jested. “Nothing like the fashion sense of a couple of young girls to spruce an old man up. Good work, you two.”

“Yay! The Madam likes it, hippity!”

“I want a tasty treat later, hoppity.”

Harts could only chuckle at the scene. There is an old saying in Japan that

means ‘three women make a party,’ but each of them seemed capable of that on their own.

“Shall we?” the Madam asked Harts. “You and I are going on a little date. There’s a first time for everything, isn’t there?” she chuckled.

“How many times can hell freeze over...?” Harts countered with a sense of resignation. First the encounter with the actual Fallen Angel Lucifer, and now this. Wherever destiny led him now, Harts would follow.

The Military Leader and the Village of Rabbi — Part 2

Harts and the Madam walked out onto the streets and were immediately met by crowds of people. With the exception of Yahooo, eastern Holylight was mostly barren wasteland. There had never been any other place that drew a crowd. Following the Madam’s leisurely and graceful walk, Harts observed his surroundings. Construction projects were being done all over the village, each of them going fast enough to maintain a cloud of dust.

(Are those barrels of water...?) Harts noticed workers coming up to who must have been the water attendants, receiving large steins of water to quench their thirst. Some workers even asked for a wooden bucket of water to shove their heads into. There was no explanation as to how a mere worker could afford such a luxury. Harts then noticed the pair of men hurriedly running a wheelbarrow up and down the streets, filled to the brim with buckets full of water. “How generous... You must have Dona’s eternal gratitude,” Harts remarked. The practically-exclusive water source in Holylight was the Spell Stones mined in the west, which Dona controlled. Harts wanted to snarl as he imagined all this construction work lining Dona’s pockets more than anyone else’s.

“You have it all wrong. The Demon Lord provides all that water.”

“The Fallen Angel Lucifer has control over water, too? Never heard of such a tale.”

“I wouldn’t have believed it, either,” the Madam whispered. No one in this world could have imagined infinite water, both hot and cold, being used every day. Harts had to experience a bath himself in order to believe it. However, no

one of this world may ever truly understand it, no matter how many baths they took. The facilities in this village were of Akira Ono's world, and would never not be foreign to this one. Imagine technology from Mars or an ancient ruin on Jupiter materializing on Earth. It was too much to ask for anyone to understand such a thing.

"The Demon Lord gives out salt to all of his workers, too."

"Get off of it..." Harts dismissed the idea. It was ridiculous. Holylight, an inland nation surrounded by mountains, imported its salt, which made it extremely expensive. Even though the salt brought in was crude batches of boiled down salt water, it was nonetheless valuable. Even in the northern land of the military nobles, salt was extremely rare. Any amount they had was kept secure in a vault.

"You should try the salt sauna later. I think it'll open up your mind."

"Sau—what...? Come to think of it, that Tahara mentioned something like a 'public bath'..."

"Right. It might be a good idea to get your feet wet there."

"What sort of euphemism is this...? What thing or concept could it signify in the world of the Fallen Angel...?"

Hart's straight reaction reminded the Madam that, despite having completely acclimated to it, this village was filled with unimaginable miracles. Most sane people of this world would struggle to grasp them. "Yes, there's no rush," she said. "Why don't you spend some time here for 'rehabilitation?'"

Harts had suffered some major injuries, which made the term more fitting. "So many people are waiting for me," he answered. "I don't have the time to waste in this village. In any case..." He observed his surroundings with the eyes of a skilled military man. The ground had been leveled, multiple streets paved, and each section of the village had a defined function. The concept seemed simple, but putting it into practice required an exorbitant amount of funds. The prerequisite to the project was demolishing everything in the space and starting from scratch, and failure was not an option. In fact, they had to give up all functionalities the village already had in order to start the project. It required serious guts on top of finances.

“Waiting for you, you say... I think you’ve fought long enough,” the Madam said, halting Harts in his tracks. He had just told Luna the same thing. “No one will blame you for taking a little break. In fact, I won’t *let* them.”

“I never thought I’d hear a caring word come out of you. It was worth surviving this long, after all.” Harts couldn’t help but turn to sarcasm, but who could have blamed him? The Madam’s comment was the off-putting one, considering their relationship.

Then, a jarringly cheerful voice interrupted them. “Oh, it’s Harts. Now what do you think of my village?”

“Lady Luna...”

Decorum might have dictated asking about his injuries first, but Luna hadn’t changed. She simply couldn’t wait to brag about her village.

Eagle looked frazzled behind her, but stepped forward and deeply bowed to Harts. “U-Um... Lord Harts... Thank you, for what you did the other day. I’m sorry that—”

“You’re Lady Luna’s friend.” Harts didn’t know how to feel. The demi-human before him might have triggered a war between Holylight and the Tzardom, yet she was the very reason that Luna’s powers as a true Holy Maiden had been awakened.

Seemingly oblivious to Harts’ plight, Luna continued with her usual cheeriness. “I’d love to brag all about— I mean, show you around the village, Harts, but I’m giving my servant the tour today. Better luck next time! Take it away, Madam!”

“Uh-huh,” she answered. “And where are you going, Little Luna?”

“The farms! Aku’s helping there again... What’s she thinking, always working instead of hanging out with me!?”

If the Demon Lord had heard, he would have asked Luna what she was thinking, never putting any work into the village. Then Luna skipped away, pulling Eagle by the hand. She came and went like a gust of wind. The pair who were left behind couldn’t help but feel like Luna took the tension between them with her.

“She makes me feel silly for holding onto grudges all of these years.”

“She’s much more approachable than before...” Harts’ sentiment was genuine. The Luna he knew before had always exuded animosity toward the powerful and higher-ups of Holylight. She even seemed to always have her teeth bared against those around her. Harts noticed that her expression was much more relaxed and kind. He could have said the same for the Madam, however. (She’s changed quite a bit, too. This one used to be impossibly imperious...) After passing through each sector of the village, they finally arrived at the front, where the chain of carriages continued out, causing the entrance to the village to be congested with people and supplies.

“There’s even more than before...” Harts remarked. Judging by the cloud of dust towards the back of the line, he imagined more coming to join them. He couldn’t believe his eyes.

Tahara was blowing some kind of whistle and directing the carriages through the entrance, as Tron stared out at the crowd with sleepy eyes from atop a fence.

“That man’s no good. Dirty color. Trying to steal money, or something.”

“A petty thief, huh? Hey, you. Get out of here.”

“H-Huh!? Wait a minute!”

“You’re not on the list.” Tahara shooed him with his hand. One can only imagine how the man felt, having his crime discovered before he even committed it.

“Wh-What proof do you have to— Ahh!”

A bullet pierced the ground by the man’s foot. Tahara had fired it, without even looking in the man’s direction. “You’re a lucky guy... If the Secretary had been here, you might have been skinned alive to make an example.”

“Wh-Wh-What the hell is this village!?”

The man fled, and Tahara resumed traffic control like nothing had happened. It was a sort of demonstration that made it clear to those around them that anyone bearing ill intentions toward the village will not get away with it.

After watching that scene, Harts felt a chill down his spine at the mysterious line of defense. Was that little girl using some sort of magical item that detected malice? If such an item did exist, it would bring about a revolution to defense strategies around the world. “Everything about this village is incomprehensible. Least of which this drove of carriages...” Harts muttered, exhausted.

“This will be about a tenth of the cargo coming into the village,” the Madam answered, much to Harts’ surprise. “I have them buying a lot of preserved meats and vegetables, wine, along with materials like stone, metal, steel, bronze, lumber, leather, Spell Stones, and fertilizer, too. Oh, and well-made salt.”

“It sounds like the making of a trade post.” Harts couldn’t help but tighten his fists. All of the things she had just listed were dire necessities for the military nobles, especially during war season when their prices spiked. If the line of carriages really were a tenth of the entire import, the cost for all of those goods would have been astronomical. Any other business in the country would have been shaken at the sight.

“Those goods will be unloaded at Gatekeeper.”

“At our fortress...? What for!?” Harts raised his voice.

The Madam bowed in apology. “Harts. I apologize for everything I’ve done over the years.”

Harts was seeing white from the sudden turn of events. “Apologize...? What’s gotten into you...!?” he blurted out in dismay.

The Madam continued, keeping her head down. “You were right about me. I had never paid any mind to anyone but myself. I can imagine that, as someone who’s defended our border with your blood, you hate me enough to kill me many times over.”

(She got me,) Harts thought. He immediately tried to escape the situation he was put in. “Stop it... Raise your head.” It was shocking enough that the prideful Madam had apologized to her long-standing political enemy, but this was the worst possible place she could have done it. They were standing before a crowd of people pouring into the village, many of them citizens of Holylight, and there

were numerous nobles among them, having been invited by the Madam. Many were international merchants and delivery persons, as well. Harts could only imagine how he looked to the crowd, forcing an obviously high-class lady to bow in apology. (You snake...!) If Harts dared to refuse a handshake with someone who fully admitted her fault, he could very well have been labeled as unforgiving and heartless. Despite her apology, the Madam was on the offensive. While the crowd had no way of knowing this, the Madam had practically tickled Harts in the face with a stack of money by gloating about all of the goods she had purchased.

(What pathetic corner she has put me in...!) Harts was finally speechless. The scene this crowd was witnessing was far from reality. The Madam had seemingly forsaken her pride and the hassle of keeping up appearances by making a whole-hearted apology in public. If he had only been standing on a literal battlefield, he would have maneuvered his army to turn the situation around. Alas, this was a political battlefield. The Madam was the starlet who carried on the show on this particular stage. Before he knew, Harts had been pinned, with no choice but to play out his death scene. (She bested me...!) The commotion only grew as the noble wives staying at the resort came out with their handmaidens to join the crowd.

“I can’t believe it... The Madam just apologized to Harts...!”

“How long is that bonehead going to force her to remain like that!?”

“How could he be so cruel to a lady in public...?”

“What’s gotten into Lord Harts?”

Hellfire began to surround Harts. He moved to contain it, as much as he could. “Raise... your head... I accept... your apology...” he managed to squeeze out.

The Madam, however, remained on the offensive. She knew better than anyone that verbal agreements meant nothing in politics. She gingerly raised her head, revealing a brimming smile. “Thank you, dear Harts. I do have a proposal for you... I want to put the past behind us, and build a new relationship. What do you say?”

The murmuring in the crowd grew louder. They wondered if they were bearing witness to a historical peace treaty between the ruler of central high

society and the leader of the military nobles. The gossip-prone noble wives watched with bated breath, with Tahara casually enjoying a smoke above, surveying the scene. His eyes gave away that he was impressed by the Madam's cunning maneuver. He had been told that she intended to make peace, but not that she would blindside him straight into the final stages of negotiations. It was as if she had cornered Harts, his only exit blocked by a mountain of treasure. While he *was* technically trapped, things could have been a lot worse. What else was there for him to do but chuckle and accept the offer?

Calculating the course of action ahead, Tahara smirked. (Mortal enemies joining forces out of the blue... That's gotta make quite a splash.) It was akin to the Satcho alliance at the end of the feudal era in Japan. While their forces would rapidly grow, Tahara saw a more impactful benefit in smoking out the opposition and forcing them to band together. (Are you watching this, Mister Secretary? It's all going according to your plan...) It all started when he healed Sambo's eyes, which served as a bridge to charm the Madam. Then, he saved Harts' life. The Demon Lord had thrown Yu, Luna, and even the Satanists and the Tzardom into the mix at the right places and times. As the Demon Lord seemed to juggle his pieces, these mortal enemies were about to put aside their differences before anyone saw it coming. The political sphere had often been described as a lair of monsters, but Tahara saw the Demon Lord puppeteering the whole thing, living up to his name. Of course, the Demon Lord himself had no such calculations in mind. He would have rolled out of a chair in surprise if he had read Tahara's mind on the matter.

Seeing that the time was right, Tahara gave a round of applause. "Now that was something!" he cheerfully called. "Why shouldn't people who live in the same country get along like this? Wow, *that* was touching!" His remark earned a death glare from Harts, but the old man wasn't in a position to refute it. "Why don't you shake on it? On the honor of Little Lun— eh, Miss Holy Maiden! What do you say?"

Harts resigned himself to his fate and sighed. The inclusion of the Holy Maiden, the Madam's apology, the promise of massive support in the form of supplies, and most significantly of all, the return of the mythical Ruler of Night... Harts now saw no way to turn this around. Harts knew when to fold, and

understood the futility of fighting a losing battle.

Having caught wind of the commotion, Luna came running at them from a distance, followed by Wo Wungol, the infamous bandit leader, and Eagle, who looked unsure of what to do. Aku was running beside her, happily smiling. Apparently, Luna had gathered the whole gang without any reason except to gloat. “What’s all this?” she demanded. “Don’t you leave me out of anything fun!”

“S-Sister Luna...” Aku answered, reading the room. “I think they’re in the middle of something important.”

Luna remained oblivious. “More the reason for *me* to be here! I’m the lady of this village! No one’s more important than me!”

“H-Heh heh...” Aku chuckled.

“You haven’t changed at all, Luna...” Eagle chimed in, panting.

“What the hell!?” Wungol protested. “I’m busy digging those damn wells, you know!”

“Shut up, Servant Number Two! I never gave you any rights!”

Harts watched the new ruckus and remembered the question he had been mulling over since speaking with Luna after leaving his fortress. He couldn’t help but wonder if this journey would provide him with some sort of answer. (Until now, I had only had enough to maintain the bare minimum... Is this the solution I was looking for? Or something else?) Even as Harts refrained from making any premature determinations, he was sure of one thing. (If this staged handshake proves to be genuine...) He would have a ground to stand against Dona’s nobles, which he considered a dark cloud that loomed over Holylight.

Martial Harts Race: Human — Age: 64

Skills:

Leader — Talent to lead. Modifier on Charisma.

Tornado Kick — A kick that can tear through full armor.

Twined Dance — A barrage of kicks in all directions.

- Military Leader** — Talent for commanding an army. Modifier on military-relevant stats.
 - Command the Battlefield** — Controls groups on the battlefield.
 - Read the Battlefield** — Talent for accurate assessments of geography and situation on the battlefield.
 - Pep Talk** — Motivates subordinates on and off of the battlefield.
 - Siege Master** — Modifies the army's defenses during a siege.
 - Cavalry** — Modifies the army's charge strength on horseback.
 - Motivational Speaker** — Recover the army's morale when losing.
 - Holy War (ATK)** — Gains the Angel's blessing while fighting in Holylight. +40% to the army's Attack.
 - Holy War (DEF)** — Gains the Angel's blessing while fighting in Holylight. +40% to the army's Defense.
 - Turn the Tide** — Upon losing 70%+ of the army, greatly increases the remaining soldiers' Attack and greatly decreases their Defense.
- Level: 19 — HP: ? — Stamina: ? — Attack: 14+5 — Defense: 13+12 — Dexterity: 16 — Magic: 5 — Magic Defense: 13+8

A noble who defends Gatekeeper, the grand fortress that stands on the northern border of Holylight. He is widely considered the leader of the militaristic nobles that live in northern Holylight, and has the skills and charisma to back it up. While he is a skilled warrior by his own right, his true talent lies in commanding an army. The Northern Nations have suffered numerous bitter defeats at Hart's hands. Ironically, the peace that he and his men have defended only served to further corrupt the nobles of Holylight.

Work, Elegantly Done As numerous nobles watched with bated breath, Harts and the Madam faced each other and shook hands. Luna watched with a solemn expression, and gently poised her Holy Staff above their clasped hands.

“I, Luna Elegant the Holy Maiden, hereby celebrate your agreement of peace. May the Wise Angel bless your newfound relationship...”

Luna’s grounded presence rendered Harts and the Madam speechless. They couldn’t believe that the Holy Maiden before them was the same Luna who had been yapping a moment ago. Soon, golden magic began to flow out of her staff, cradling the two nobles. Gold magic, a Luna-original, specialized in attack spells that vanquished evil. This, however, was something else. The golden light that seemed to paint the air around them was filled with kindness, enveloping Harts and the Madam with momentary bliss. It was as if the Angel herself had descended from the heavens to commend the pair for the lives they had led.. While they fought on different grounds, their lives had each been a series of difficult battles. Somehow, both of them felt as if it had all been worth it. The crowd cheered in celebration of this historical truce. In a world so lacking in entertainment, even this sort of thing turned into a bona-fide spectacle.



Tahara shrewdly read the air, and decided to fan the celebratory flames. He clapped his hands. “All right, everybody! Let’s pack it up early today and start drinking while the sun’s high! Anyone looking for a party, meet me in the Common District! Bring all your friends,” Tahara shouted. The ‘Grand Foreman’ in charge of the entire project said so, so work was, in fact, done for the day.

“Work done. Drink and get drunk.” Tron followed Tahara, indecisively floating through the air.

On the other hand, one of the new day-workers timidly spoke up. “B-But, won’t you dock our pay...?”

“What do you think I am, some kind of miser? You’ll get paid for the whole day, don’t sweat it. Y’know what? I’m buying! Get moving, already!”

“F-For real!?”

“Yeeeeeeeah!”

“Did you hear that!? The Grand Foreman’s buying!”

“Go get all of the other guys!”

The commotion spread through the crowd, even reaching the convoy of carriages. The story of this event would reach beyond the borders of Holylight.

The Madam watched Tahara in action, and was once again shaken, even only imagining what he was capable of. He had just turned a single handshake into village-wide festivities, spreading the story throughout and even beyond the nation. Naturally, this would draw some visitors out of curiosity, along with more day-workers who heard of the wealth that lay within the village. Moreover, it was fair to say that he had cornered Harts. After making such a big deal out of their truce, Harts couldn’t go back on it. One innocuous move stretched into multiple directions like grubby tentacles inching closer to Tahara’s ultimate goal. Even Harts couldn’t be mad about it.

“I didn’t plan *all* of this, just so you know,” the Madam clarified.

“I can tell that much,” Harts answered. “I would hate to find myself an enemy of a man like that... He’s the type that’s hardest to deal with in combat,” he spat out.

Gleefully chuckling, the Madam rang a bell, which prompted an old butler to suddenly appear before them. “At your service, Madam.”

“Pick up where the Grand Foreman left off. We’re responsible for the delivery of that cargo, anyway.”

With a nod from the elderly butler, the employees of House Butterfly jumped into action.

Aku and Eagle had been watching the series of events.

“I don’t really understand, but... Sister Luna is incredible!” Aku remarked, as the bustling of the crowd lingered.

“Right... It made me realize that she’s... Luna’s really a Holy Maiden.” Eagle smiled, and decided to seize the opportunity to ask Aku the question that was on her mind. “I did notice that you call Luna ‘Sister...’”

“Well, she... told me to call her that...”

“I expected as much. She hasn’t changed that much.”

“B-But, it’s not that I don’t like calling her that. Just that I don’t seem worthy to...”

“You’re a nice girl. I can see why Luna wants to be your sister.”

“Urm...” Aku shyly turned her eyes down as Eagle gently stroked her hair. She couldn’t face Eagle’s clear beauty, which was forged from her ephemerality and her heart hardened with resolve. She was less conventionally beautiful, and more fairytale-like. “I-I don’t know if I can ask this, but... What happened up north?”

“Right... Now where to start...?” Far too much had happened. Despite the barrage of trials and tribulations, it ended with Luna vanquishing a giant devil and the Demon Lord blowing the mock-angel and Tzardom battalion to pieces. While Eagle understood Luna’s attack to be within the realm of magic, she felt like the Demon Lord’s powers were completely extrinsic, like nothing she had ever seen or heard of before. “That man called the Demon Lord...”

“Did something happen to Master Demon Lord!?”

“No, he was terribly strong. And it seemed like he wasn’t even close to using

his full power.”

“O-Oh, I see...” Aku wasn’t told in detail what happened up north. Neither Luna nor Tahara, and much less the Demon Lord, wanted Aku to hear any of the bloody imagery. The one left in the dark, however, couldn’t help but be curious. “Will Master Demon Lord return safely...?”

“I guarantee it,” Eagle reassured. “He will return without a scratch, no matter how far he goes. I can put money on that.” Eagle gently wrapped her pinky around Aku’s, and showed her cloudless, brimming smile.

“Erm, um, th-thank you...!” Aku couldn’t help but blush at Eagle’s beauty, even though she knew that Eagle was a girl too.

“Not only will he come home safely... But you should probably worry about the places he goes to, rather than him.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Aku asked, clueless.

Eagle laughed. “Don’t worry about it.”

Then, Luna appeared before them with the leader of the Mole. Wungol’s face was in knots, in contrast to Luna’s brimming with pride. “Another great day of work, elegantly done!”

“Elegant my ass... You tried to stab my hand again!”

“I was trying to write up a contract for their truce.”

“Like hell, you were! You’re supposed to use the blood of the people involved! Why do I have to get cut up when I had nothing to do with the whole thing!?”

“What are you going on about? You’re my servant-number-two, so you do as I say.”

“You must be a witch disguised as a Holy Maiden!”

Aku and Eagle laughed at the interaction. They knew that the self-righteousness they saw now and the solemnity they saw earlier were both accurate representations of Luna.

“All right! Aku, Eagle, let’s hit up the hot springs!”

“Yes, Sister Luna!”

“Again?” Eagle hesitated. “I just feel like it’s such a waste. All that water... What kind of power does the Demon Lord use to—”

“You’re *still* hung up on that? Don’t sweat about the details. Doesn’t matter what he builds, it’s all my village, so it belongs to me!” Luna gave her same-old response, and Eagle could only chuckle about it. As a matter of fact, she wasn’t wrong. “You can take the day off, too,” Luna said to Wungol. “Go buy your servants some food, servant.” She tossed a leather bag filled with silver coins at him.

Wungol looked incredulous until he saw the gleam of so many coins inside the bag and changed his tune. “Look at you, being considerate for a change. That’s a pleasant surprise.”

“Duh. An elegant Holy Maiden always makes sure to feed her do— I mean, reward her servants.”

“Who’re you calling a dog!? I refuse to accept you *or* your sister as our Holy Maiden! She’s worse than a bandit!”

“How dare you!? Apologize to all dog-kind! As for my sister... I won’t argue with you.”

“Dammit! Seriously, how’d you get to be Holy Maiden!? This country’s gone insane!”

While the village of Rabbi was wrapped up in its usual commotion, there were storms brewing elsewhere. One revolving around Demon Lord, who returned to Animania, and another around Akane, who charged into Hellion territory. One would have shuddered to imagine what kind of catastrophe could occur when these two tornadoes collided.

A Deal Under the Table

—The Secret Lair within Animania.

Following the incident in Suneo, the Demon Lord had Quick Traveled back to the entrance of the Secret Lair. He observed his surroundings, but only found the same deep forest and complete silence. (Ugh... What a mess...) The Demon Lord had sent a few lines of Communication to Akane, but received no response. He figured that she was either ignoring him or shutting him out. He didn't even have a clue as to where Akane was, even if he wanted to seek her out. (Good old Akane... It doesn't bother me when she does it, somehow...) He couldn't help but wonder why. If this had been Tahara or Yu, the Demon Lord would have been distraught, panicked that they finally realized that they didn't have to listen to his orders anymore. But the advisor he was dealing with now was Akane... This very thing seemed like the status quo with her, so nothing was wrong.

(Reckless and thoughtless, ignores orders on the daily, and acted on nobody's accord but her own... I was the one who wrote her to be that way...) In fact, if Akane had turned into an obedient order-follower, that would signify the corruption of her backstory. That would be much scarier to the Demon Lord than Akane acting on her own. (When it comes to this world, off-kilter is exactly what she's supposed to be... What am I doing?) The Demon Lord couldn't help but burst out laughing at the ridiculousness of his own creation. For some reason, one of Zero's lines popped into his mind.

The one who cracks a stupid smile's the strongest one of them all.

There was no rhyme or reason to that ridiculous *bosozoku* line, but it somehow felt right on the mark. (You might be right on this one... I'll keep smiling while I take care of things.) His agitation had dissipated, and the Demon Lord opened the door to the Secret Lair with his usual expression... to find Olgan with an exasperated look on her face.

"You're back," she remarked. "What is the matter with your kin...? She grabbed Mynk and rushed out of here."

"It's normal for her to be *ab* normal. Don't worry about it." The Demon Lord

chuckled, like a father speaking of his rambunctious daughter.

For some reason, Olgan felt something tighten around her chest, and even she couldn't identify the emotion. "Hmph. You two are quite chummy..." she grumbled.

"Chummy? She's got me blocked..."

"Blocked?"

Hooking his coat and jacket on the wall, the Demon Lord sat on the chic log stool and opened his notebook. "Now where could she have gone...? She said something about heading east."

"The barking woman did...? Who knows what she's up to?" Olgan wasn't particularly concerned about Mynk—she had spent enough time with her to know how powerful she was. She was less sure about Akane, and couldn't make heads or tails of what she might do.

"She said something about selling and hurting people..." the Demon Lord said. "Any place come to mind, Olgan?"

"Selling, huh...? The slave market, most likely."

"Slave market...?" The Demon Lord didn't imagine a fantastical scene, but the historical slave trade that took place on Earth. Of course, slavery existed in Japan as well as in the western world. During feudal Japan, even famous shogun like Takeda Shingen and Uesugi Kenshin had their men take women and children away from the villages they conquered back to their own land. The concept of universal human rights was a relatively recent development, and slavery had always existed through the history of humanity. "There are still places like that out in the open...?" The Demon Lord wasn't the type to loudly protest or feel anger towards the existence of a slave market, unlike many fictional protagonists. Slavery was a historical fact on Earth, and an—albeit mistaken—path that humanity had traveled. He wasn't so juvenile as to automatically fly his banner in outrage by the mere existence of the practice.

"Still...?' Interesting. Were there no slaves back in your time?"

"None anywhere near me, that's for sure," the Demon Lord said, picturing his life in modern-day Japan.

Olgan, of course, wasn't aware of that. She looked surprised. "What of the legends that—"

"Let's not talk of the past, but the present. Do you know where it is?" The Demon Lord deflected the topic in an attempt to avoid any complicated conversations.

While Olgan was dissatisfied, she reluctantly looked down at the notebook, which only contained the forest of Animania, and not Hellion territory. "My knowledge is old," she said. "I have no idea where it is now."

"I see..."

"But I do have a lead."

"Tell me about it."

Olgan told him about the quartet of Anima that she had done dealings with. The cat-hybrid in particular made a living out of sneaking into Hellion territory and smuggling out goods and information.

"Good. I can speed things up by talking to them."

"You'll need high-ranking game to make a deal with them. Unfortunately, I don't have any on me."

"Or a good bottle, right? According to your description. Then, there's no problem," the Demon Lord boasted. He was quite the drinker, and had implemented a ridiculously large variety of spirits in the Game. Most of which were alcohol that existed in the real world, much to the delight of the small percentage of like-minded drinkers among the players.

"Just so you know, you'll need a ridiculously strong liquor like Fire Spirit or Lightning Water."

"You want *me* to prepare a stiff drink...? Rah ha ha ha!" The Demon Lord burst out laughing, slapping his knee. He seemed to be imagining how he would get these Anima drunk. He looked like an innocent child and a father of a large family, all at the same time.

Olgan couldn't help but stare at the Demon Lord's profile. Perhaps because of his demeanor contrasting to his fearsome exterior and descriptions from

legends, Olgan couldn't help but find the Demon Lord charming at times, and even see fatherly characteristics in him. (I would like to gaze up at the stars with him again...) Olgan thought, then realized what kind of expression must have been on her face, and hurriedly averted her gaze. She had derailed too far off of her initial resolve. (No! I came here to kill my... What's gotten into me!?) Olgan stood, visibly angry. It was written all over her face that she was blaming the Demon Lord for everything. "Let's go!" she urged. "Time is finite! Never say never. Let's hurry!"

"A-All right..."

"We'll return to the border, first...! Come on, take us there with your weird power! But ask me before you grab me this time!"

"What are you getting angry about?"

"I'm not angry!"

"Good grief," the Demon Lord muttered, grabbing his coat and jacket off the wall with one hand and taking Olgan under his other arm as if she were a little child.



“I-I told you to ask!”

“You want me to tell you every move I make like we’re at a construction site? Give me a break.”

The Demon Lord jumped with Olgan to the border via Quick Travel. Apparently distracted by Akane’s erratic movements, there was no one left in the area.

“L-Let me down! I’m not a child!”

“Did you think I’d buy that you were 400? You look like you’re the same age as Aku.”

“Who is that...? Another female?”

“What do you mean ‘another?’”

Picking up on what must have sounded like a lover’s quarrel, the bull-hybrid and dwarf poked their heads out of the cottage.

“It’s you, little girl... Is it one of yours who broke into the forest? Even I can’t cover that up after all that noise,” the dwarf said.

“No need to cover for anything. Is the cat-hybrid with you?” Olgan asked.

“Before I answer that, who’s that human? You seem rather close.”

Realizing that she was still being held under the Demon Lord’s arm, she rushed to pry herself away. “No!” she cried. “This man has nothing to do with me! I simply made a business deal with him!”

“A-All right...” The dwarf was taken aback by Olgan’s uncharacteristic demeanor. He had always known Olgan to be a calm and collected Firebrand with powerful magic. Never had he seen her so frazzled.

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord was enamored at his first encounter with these unknown species. (So he’s a dwarf... And he’s an Anima...) The dwarf aside, the bull-hybrid had a complete bull’s head and looked just like an enemy monster from an RPG. Said ominous bull wordlessly chewing on grass seemed to have tickled the Demon Lord’s humor, as his shoulders began to quiver. (He’s been eating grass all this time... He looks scary, but he must be an herbivore. He’s got

a buff physique, too. Maybe that grass is more nutritious than it looks...) One of the Demon Lord's bad habits had come out. Once something caught his interest, he wanted to know every detail about it until he reached his own conclusion. On the other hand, he remained completely unmotivated to learn about anything he had judged irrelevant. Even as he happily imagined details about the grass the bull was munching on, the Demon Lord remained uninterested by any economical concept of this world. To call his curiosity lopsided was an understatement. This made him a great creator, but not so much a potent ruler without the help of advisors like Tahara.

As Olgan and the dwarf continued their conversation, the Demon Lord interrupted: "Uh, Mister Bull, over there. Sorry to interrupt your meal. Do you mind?"

"Moo?"

"Does that grass taste good? Or do you eat it for its rich nutrients?"

"Moo. A human interested in grass? Weird."

(You're the weird one!) The Demon Lord silently protested. (How do you have a bull's head on a human body!?) The bull continued to chew on his grass before retrieving a bale of hay.

"Moo. These are dried *delicious grassius* . I can eat these for days."

"That gross stuff!?" the Demon Lord recalled. "Hold on. Are you eating something else right now?"

"This is *muscle grasscle* . Builds muscles."

"Little too literal, don't you think!? Who the hell named it that?"

"Moo... Me..."

"You did!?" the Demon Lord cried out, having long forgotten to keep up his ruse.

Seeing the two pulling off a comedy routine, the dwarf spoke up, having heard enough. "You stupid cow! What are you chit-chatting with a human for!?"

Olgan followed suit. "You seem happy when you're talking to the bull-

hybrid...”

The scene before the cottage grew louder, causing the cat-hybrid to come out. She seemed to have just woken up, as she stretched both arms into the air and let out a big yawn. “Shut up, meow. Anyone who disturbs *my* cat nap will suffer death by a thousand scratches.”

“About time.” Olgan turned to the Demon Lord. “She’s the one.”

“What, meow? Another human? Security’s gone lax lately.”

“Sorry to wake you. I had a few questions for you.” The Demon Lord lit his cigarette after seeing the cat-hybrid that practically crawled out of a Broadway musical. He didn’t seem too surprised, having spent all of that time with the Bunnies. “Do you know where the slave market is? It would be a great help if you could tell me.”

“Why should I tell a meow-re human like... Mew?” The cat sniffed the air and approached the Demon Lord before beginning to pace laps around him, for some reason. “You smell pretty nice for a human... I’m feline good, now.”

“Really? Well, this smoke won’t do you any harm. Don’t worry.”

“Sniff, sniff. Sniffity, sniffity. Sniffle-puff.” The cat buried her face into the Demon Lord’s chest and inhaled with euphoria, as if she was snorting catnip.

“Wait a min— Haven’t you smelled enough?” the Demon Lord asked.

Having watched them for a moment, Olgan spoke out, irritated. “First the bull, and now the cat? You get along well with the Anima, don’t you?”

“This isn’t really getting along, but more of— Hey, get off of me, already! It’s getting creepy!” The Demon Lord finally pushed the cat away from him and fixed his tie. The cat protested with a meow, but the Demon Lord seemed ready to jump into business. He threw his cigarette into his portable ashtray and began negotiating. “If you can tell me where it is, I’ll give you a bottle you’d really like.”

The dwarf scoffed. “A bottle? From a *human* ...? What good is your watered-down crap? I’ll let you live for the sake of our little girl, here. Beat it.”

“I would also love to try one of your drinks,” the Demon Lord added.

“Ha! You think we’d give a drink away to a human? I hear our Fire Spirits go for a ridiculous price on your side... Heh, you humans can’t blacksmith nor make a decent spirit.” The dwarf’s ruthless minimization of humanity didn’t bother the Demon Lord one bit. He had no stake in the battle between humans and demi-humans, and he wasn’t even from this world. There was no way that he would take any of the insults personally.

“Fire Spirit sounds like something distilled, like *shochu*, whiskey, or brandy... Could be vodka?”

“Do you understand the words that are coming out of my mouth!?” the dwarf exploded. “Who the hell is this guy, little girl!?”

“There’s no use,” Olgan answered. “He acts on his own impulse and accord. No one can stop him from doing anything.”

“Dammit, if anyone sees us talking to some human...” The dwarf seemed to be more confirmed about the scenario now. Begrudgingly, the dwarf headed into the cottage. “I’m not happy about it... But get in. Before the snakes see us.”

“Hm. I’m not sure about all that, but I’ll take you up on the offer. Now don’t worry, I have prepared a good snack for the drink, too.”

“Snack my ass... Never thought I’d ever meet such a shameless human...” The dwarf hurried inside without even trying to hide his irritation. The cow and cat followed at a leisurely pace. None of them knew that the man they considered a mere human was none other than the Demon Lord himself, nor that he would come to destroy one of the pillars of the Seven Sins without mercy.

The Tasting

“So this is the housing of the land...” The Demon Lord looked around after entering the cottage. It was a log cabin, mostly the same as the type still seen in modern day. The only noteworthy thing in the cottage was the bales of hay stacked up here and there.

“Come on, old meowan. Bring out the Fire Spirit.”

“Why should I!?”

“Stingy stingy, old meowan! What’s the harm in sharing?”

“You moron! I’ll have less of it if he drinks it!”

Ignoring the commotion, the Demon Lord ran his hand along the wall and assessed its sturdiness. While it was well built, he didn’t find any special technique or power in it.

“Olgan, do most people around here live in cottages like this?”

“Hm? Different species live in different houses. Some live above the trees or below ground, for example.”

“Below ground, you say...? Like a bomb shelter? Perhaps it’s natural for an animal. Beavers build their nests on the river, come to think of it. And there are birds that drill holes into trees to live in. I’ve heard of animals that take over nests built by other animals...” Muttering, the Demon Lord fell deeper into thought. He hadn’t thought about the types of animal habitats in a long time. It was as if an office worker in the city grew tired of his lifestyle and decided to camp out in the woods for the first time in decades. “If we go that far... A bunch of small creatures create their habitat in human houses. In fact, people have roommates. On the other hand, hotels *rent out* a part of their habitat for money...”

“There you go, rambling nonsense again... Satisfied?” Olgan asked.

“Yes, no big deal. I was just reminded that human nests are just as diverse.”

“Human nests, huh...?” Olgan had no clue what he was saying.

But for this man, the conclusion he reached was rather impactful. (At the end

of the day, there isn't much difference between humans, animals, and the Anima...) At their core, most creatures ate, built nests, made families, and reproduced. That was the thought that the Demon Lord had ended up with from the starting point of entering this particular habitat. Decades of creating his own worlds had immensely grown his imagination. His inspiration and thought process were unlike most others, which explained how he could go through creating an entire world, then turn around and destroy it. He was a born tyrant, and if he didn't like a place, he was ready to destroy it no matter who it belonged to. How would he perceive the slave market?

"Meow! Drinking Fire Spirit during the day is the best! Hurray for the life of a lazy cat!"

"Hey, cat," the dwarf cut in. "This drink ain't for free. You better bring good game or info next time."

"It's Sunday every day... Everybody wants to be a cat!"

"Hey, stupid cat! Are you listening!?"

The shout caused the Demon Lord to turn around and see the cat gleefully tilting the bottle of alcohol. "Oh, the party's already begun. I'll take a glass of that."

"Here you go, smoky-human."

"Hey! Don't give that away to a human!"

"Hm. So this is Dwarven spirit..." The Demon Lord took a glass full of an amber-colored liquid robust with a grape-like aroma. Suddenly, the glass emanated a bright light.

"H-Hey, human! What the hell did you do!?" the dwarf demanded.

"Testing for poison, just in case. I mean no offense."

"Poison? Don't tell me you're a cleric, dressed like *that!*"

Ignoring the remark, the Demon Lord leisurely tilted the glass back. The strong alcohol slipped through his lips, the grape-like aroma flowing through his nose. "Hmm... It's a lot like cognac... It's good..."

"Hmph! *Too* good for a human. Hey, little girl. You know you're going to owe

us one, right?”

“That’s fine. Let him drink,” Olgan answered.

“Heh, you’re pretty soft with this one, huh?”

“I-I’m not soft! I don’t know what you think you see—”

“What are you getting defensive about...?” the dwarf grumbled, annoyed, as the bull continued to chew on his own grass.

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord decided to settle down for a few more drinks, and began creating one item after another at the expense of SP. “Craft Items: Fuji Water, Club Soda, D.L. Cola, Bag of Ice.” The Demon Lord wasn’t going to skimp when it came to drinking. He placed all of these must-haves on the table.

“Meow, meow, Smoky! Where were you carrying all that!?”

“Don’t tell me you can use sorcery!”

“Sorcery, magic... Call it whatever you like.” The Demon Lord seemed preoccupied with how he was going to enjoy this new spirit. First, he produced a spherical ice cube from the Bag of Ice and tossed it into the glass before unabashedly filling it with Fire Spirit. “Some say brandy on the rocks is blasphemous, but I say each to their own.”

“Putting ice in Fire Spirit? That’s one weird way to drink it, meow.”

“Let me water it down for you. It should make it smoother.” He picked out another sphere of ice and *clinked* it into a glass. While the ice looked innocuous, it was an incredible item by this world’s standards that healed the user’s Stamina by 50. At this point, the Fire Spirit was elevated to much more than just a drink. Then the Demon Lord poured plenty of Fuji Water into the glass. This was no ordinary H2O either, as it healed the user’s HP and Stamina by 50 *each* .

“I wrote in the description that this water accentuates the flavors of drinks and foods. Now it should be decent.” Decent? This was the creation of this world’s most extravagant drink that healed the drinker’s HP by 50 and Stamina by 100. Considering that the Elixir, often called the Dew of God, healed one’s HP and Stamina by 33 each, this was utterly ridiculous. Even so, the Demon Lord was just playing bartender. Meanwhile, medicine men and women of this world

were pouring in blood, sweat, and tears to the development of new concoctions. He really deserved a crack in the skull.

“It looks purrrty good... Cheers! Where everybody knows your name!”

“Were you an 80s kid?” The Demon Lord chuckled at the nostalgia, and tilted his glass back.

The cat, on the other hand... “Yeeeeeeeeeeoowwwwwwww! That’s good!”

“My ears!” the Demon Lord grumbled. The cat continued to loudly meow. “Can’t you enjoy a nice, quiet drink...?” He only saw it as a little cocktail, but the drink was far from ordinary to the creatures of this world. The cat felt like her entire body was renewed and rejuvenated. The over-healing caused a sort of high, making the cat want to shout and run around without any reason. “Now, maybe with club soda... No, I’ll make a French Highball.”

“Give meow another one, Smoky! Pour another strong load for my mouth, meowww!”

“Get off me... How am I supposed to mix drinks like this...?”

The cat began dancing around the Demon Lord, holding some hay in hand. “Drink! Smoke! Grass! Smoke grass!”

“What the hell are you saying...?” the Demon Lord grumbled.

Having watched the cat’s reaction, the dwarf begrudgingly approached the table and held out his glass without a word. It must have been too hard to resist for a drinker like him.

“That’s my bottle to begin with,” he said. “Pour me a glass, already.”

“Hm. Your spirit is, indeed, delicious.” The Demon Lord happily made the dwarf a French Highball that included the club soda and ice.

The dwarf cautiously sniffed the drink, then must have decided to give it the green light. He drank the whole glass in one motion.

“Hoo! What the hell is this!? It’s amazing!”

“Is it house rules or something to shout after every drink...?”

“Hey, human! What did you put into my Fire Spirit!? Just give me another

glass!”

“Hold on. Let’s settle down with a brandy and coke.”

“Whatever that is, give it to me!”

As the other members in the cottage grew louder, Olgan resigned herself to lying down on a bale of hay. She had never enjoyed a drink, nor did she ever want to. With her palm under her chin, she stared at the Demon Lord as he gleefully laughed among the Anima. (It appears that he has some sort of bond with them...) In the mythical great war, the Anima distanced themselves from the Angels and humans and built their own nation. While their relationship with the Fallen Angel Lucifer was never mentioned in any surviving documents, it was assumed that they didn’t oppose each other, in the very least. An enemy of one’s enemy was their friend, after all. (Then, what about Firebrands...?) Olgan returned to this curiosity, and kept herself busy by going through a cycle of getting frustrated and regaining her cool on her own.

“This is a party, after all...” the Demon Lord started. “I have some good snacks in mind.” The Demon Lord went on to produce the likes of Dark Chocolate, Smoked Cheese, Sliced Ham, and Crackers and Jam, and spread them out on the table. The commotion only grew.

“Woah! This black and sweet thing is incredible! So’s this cheese!” the dwarf yelled.

“Meow, I can’t get enough! We’ll purrrty through the night!”

“I don’t mind you getting plastered, but tell me where the Slave Market is before you get too drunk...” The Demon Lord stood and approached Olgan. He must have finally realized that it might have been insensitive to hold a tasting party in front of her when he knew that she had lost her sense of taste, even though his intention was to extract information. “Sorry for all this. I’ll have one of my people take a look at your tastebuds once we take care of things here.”

“One of your kin, you mean?”

“Yes. A great doctor. She’ll get your taste back, no problem.”

“I don’t care, one way or the other.” Olgan wasn’t being facetious. She had truly never cared how things tasted. She couldn’t die from food that tasted bad,

after all. There was no room to enjoy such things in her trying life. “Are you talking about the woman in the bizarre white outfit?”

“Bizarre... Yeah, she’s the one.” Come to think of it, anyone wearing a lab coat in public would draw some curious gazes. The Demon Lord entertained the fruitless thought of making Yu some sort of appropriate outfit.

“I won’t be caught dead owing *her* a favor. I think she’s an extremely dangerous and ill-natured woman. She’s one of the darkest beings in this world,” Olgan pointed out.

(Oof. I can’t argue with any of that...) The Demon Lord silently groaned. Even though she now showed some cute gestures here and there, it only seemed extremely mismatched with her original backstory that the Demon Lord knew cover-to-cover. He awkwardly scratched his cheek with a finger. She was his creation, after all. “Well, I will never force you, but if you ever change your mind... You can always say so.”

“...Mm.” Olgan thought that the Demon Lord was overreacting. In this war-torn world, there were plenty of those who lost eyes or limbs, numerous sick people who couldn’t afford the medicine they needed, and people who starved to death. Olgan found no problem with not having her sense of taste, and considered herself lucky compared to those who had lost more. Olgan couldn’t help but wonder, though. (Were there any myths of old regarding taste? Not that many stories of that era have survived...) Then, Olgan decided to ask a question out loud. “One question. How many kin do you have?”

“I’ve only summoned three so far, but I have eight in total...” the Demon Lord answered, with a touch of nostalgia in his eyes. He had ruled as the Demon Lord of the Empire, with his eight advisors at his service. He couldn’t help but reminisce on that glimmering time in his life. It was the dawn of the internet era. Everything was undiscovered and fresh. Akira had immediately sunk deep into the online world. (Back in those days... Things were good. Individually-run sites that reeked of DIY, popular text-block sites. Multi-person chatrooms were popular, too. Not to mention sketchy sites and weird clickbait. I remember how my phone bill skyrocketed when I first started going online. Scared the crap out of me.) The Demon Lord lit a cigarette, further delving into nostalgia.

Olgan figured that he was recalling the days of old. “Are you... thinking about your past?”

“Yeah.” *Clink* went the ice as the contents of the glass poured into the Demon Lord’s mouth. His needlessly cool and solemn exterior left an unapproachable aura around him. Neither of them realized that they were each imagining completely different eras. Chasing the Fire Spirit, the Demon Lord muttered, as if to let the buzz take control, “At 11PM, it was dial-all-you-want. Everyone connected at the same time, so it became a warzone every night. Bunch of millionth visitor stuff, webrings, stupid hidden pages on sites... It took ridiculously long to load one little image. Oh, and all those people who answered a hundred questions about themselves. Nobody asked.” The Demon Lord began laughing.

Olgan couldn’t understand a single thing he was talking about. “I don’t really get it... But it sounds like it was a very enjoyable time for you.”

“Yeah. It was juvenile, savage, chaotic... Looking back on it now, it all seems golden.”

“I see...!” Olgan almost regretted that she asked the question, as she felt a heavy weight on her heart. It was the realization that the Demon Lord had eight kin with whom he spent a time close to eternity, ever since the olden days. She was worried that, as the Demon Lord summoned more advisors, the Fallen Angel would think more and more of the bygone era and lose interest in the present.

“Hm. That’s enough old stories... Olgan, when you want to heal your—”

“I appreciate the sentiment. If I feel like I need it, I will come to you.”

“A-Alright...”

Olgan had decided to end this conversation mid-topic. A strange thought had crossed her mind to prompt this. (If he’s concerned about my sense of taste so much, why shouldn’t I keep things like this...?) She didn’t understand why she felt this way. It was as if she was attempting to draw his attention by opting out of healing her defect. If her past self could see her now, her present self would have taken a hard slap to the face. “Snap out of it!” she would have said. (No! This is... you know! A tactic to keep his mind from being swallowed by the

darkness. Not that I want to draw his attention to myself or anything. Besides, it must have been a horrible world when all of his kin were around. ‘War every day at 11 p.m.’? I can only imagine the bloodshed...! He called it savage and chaotic himself!) An intense conflict ensued within Olgan, expanding her misunderstanding to her knowledge of the days of old. Of course, for anyone who was privy to all the pieces of the puzzle, this was nothing but a farce.

The dwarf and cat each called out, apparently tired of waiting for Olgan and the Demon Lord to conclude their conversation.

“Hey, Human-in-Black! Where’s the drink you brought?”

“Cough it up, Smoky!”

“‘In-black?’ ‘Smoky?’ What’s with your vocabulary?” Even as he grumbled, the Demon Lord produced Absinthe, an extremely strong alcohol that was once believed to have hallucinogenic properties, and was outlawed at one point in history outside of prohibition. “This is a favorite among many artists and poets. Apparently, legendary artists like Van Gogh and Picasso always kept a bottle of it around.”

“That’s a weird color, meow... All green and stuff... I can feel a hairball coming up.”

“I won’t argue that it picks its drinkers. But it hits deep to those who dare.” The Demon Lord dropped an ice cube in a glass and held an absinthe spoon above it, placed a sugar cube on the spoon, and poured the emerald-colored absinthe over it all. “Now, for the show.” The Demon Lord produced his Zippo from his pocket and lit the absinthe-soaked sugar cube on fire. A mystical blue flame rose from it.

“Wha— That’s Blue Fire, like the one we use!”

“Meow... So purrrrty. I could stare at it for hours.”

The heated sugar cube began to melt off of the spoon and drip down into the deep green liquid. Both the dwarf and the cat fell silent. “Now for the final touch,” the Demon Lord said, and deliberately poured a few drops of Fuji Water onto the flaming sugar cube. As the emerald-green absinthe mixed with water, it suddenly turned an opaque white. Even that color-change seemed mystical.

All eyes in the cottage were drawn to the single glass.

“Kitty gets first sip!”

“Like hell! You drank all that Fire Spirit!”

“Meowine! Bitter! Bitter! Bleh!”

The bitterness and the strong alcohol made all the fur on the cat stand up. She seemed to have a rather sweet tooth, as she hurriedly reached for a piece of chocolate and began licking it.

“Now, I’ll give it a try...” The dwarf tilted the glass back, and swirled the liquid in his mouth. It seemed uniquely herby, but the freshness of it overpowered that and blew through the dwarf’s entire body. “Another one...”

“Hit the spot, eh?” the Demon Lord jested. When people have a food or drink that they *love*, they often become lost for words. The dwarf simply waited for his next pour. “Another name for this drink is the Green Fairy. Quite fitting for this land, I think.”

“The Green... Fairy...” the dwarf muttered, entranced, staring at his glass. He didn’t chug this drink, but enjoyed little sips at a time. His stern expression had given way to that of a happy old drunk.

“There’s one called Absinthe Coke, too. It might suit you better, cat.”

“Is ‘coke’ that black, fizzy, sweet stuff? That’s meower like it!”

“I feel like I’m making a tuna-can concoction with you,” the Demon Lord chuckled, as the cat rushed him.

While an enormous turmoil ensued to the east, things were very peaceful in this little cottage.

Olgan

Race: Firebrand — Age: Over 400

Item: **Mr. Carry-All**

A rare bag with fluctuating capacity, depending on the user's Magic. Olgan also holds magical items that mask her demonic scent, detect traps, *etc.*

Level: 25 — HP: ? — Stamina: ? — Attack: ? — Defense: ? — Dexterity: ? — Magic: 43+? — Magic Defense: 48+?

Like Mynk, Olgan is an S-Rank Star Player. She is also the daughter of Belphegor, one of the Original Sins who continue to fight for power in Hellion territory. She was forced to be the test subject of her father's demented 'experimentation' from a young age. To say that she has been through hell is an understatement. Her father's centuries-long torture and experimentation has succeeded at giving her powerful immunities and resiliencies, but Olgan lost her sense of taste as well as her sense of heat and cold in exchange. As a spellcaster, her powers are unparalleled.

Trouble on the Eastern Front

—On the border of Animania.

With the moon lighting their way from above, Akane and Mynk arrived at the border between Animania and Hellion territory. The most dangerous place in this world.

“What a clear night! Perfect for taking names in the name of the moon.”

“W-We’re seriously going...!?” Mynk couldn’t help but ask after seeing Akane’s unchanging nonchalance. In fact, she was terrified of the fact that the area was dead silent despite nearing the border. Ordinarily, this borderline was difficult to even approach. The northern end hosted a legendary peak, said to be the home of the Dragon. On the southern end of the border stood a shrine protected by a mystical fox, which no one could come near. Akane and Mynk were on the southern side, but the shrine Akane had seen before had now vanished without a trace.

“Hmm...? Hakuto and I saw a weird shrine around here... Now it’s gone?”

“What’s a shrine? And, for real, we’re going into Hellion territory? Now? We should at least all go together!” Mynk’s completely reasonable suggestion went in one ear and out the other.

In fact, Akane countered with a scolding piece of philosophy. “You know what, Miss Moody? You’re not going to get anywhere in life without a little unconventionality. Gotta do anything it takes. You can’t survive just taking orders.”

“You can’t survive in Hellion territory either!”

“Hush. Someone’s coming.”

“H-Hey... Erm!”

Akane buried her face in Mynk’s bosom and covered her mouth. Soon, a pair of small fox-hybrids appeared.

“Noisy humans... Don’t you understand that this is a divine realm?”

“B-Brother’s right! This is our territory, you know!”

Mynk raised her staff, ready to fight. She wasn't going to let her guard down in front of Anima just because they looked young. Meanwhile, having turned to look, Akane seemed star-struck by them. "Ooh! Finally, some fluffies!"

"Akane! Stay on guard! These two have incredible Magic!"

"You're right about that! They have a sort of magic that draws you right in!"

"Hey, knock it off with the reckless—" Mynk's reprimand was too late to stop Akane from approaching the pair empty-handed. She was behind the red fox in the blink of an eye, and started petting her tail.

"Eeeek! B-Brother! Sh-She just touched my tail!"

"H-How did this human just get behind us!?"

"Mmm... So soft... and silky..." Akane muttered, satisfied. The blue fox reflexively tried to swat Akane away, but she had already moved, somehow, to behind the blue fox. He heard a terrifying whisper: "These ears are so floofy... Furry-shota? Now *that's* forbidden love."

"G-Get away from me, you freak!"

"Just stay away from Yu, okay? We don't want an 'x' between your name and hers."

"Wh-What are you...!? Dammit, how are you so fast!?"

"Hoo, ho, hahaha! Over here!" Akane avoided them, spinning around in circles, enjoying the tails and ears of the fox-hybrids to her heart's content.

Even Mynk finally lowered her staff at the sheer ridiculousness of the situation. *There's no doubt about it... she really is fast.* Even an S-rank adventurer like Mynk could hardly follow Akane with her eyes. She was practically as fast as a gust of wind. While Mynk was half impressed with Akane's speed, it was no laughing matter for the two foxes. Some savage human had invaded their divine realm and dared to touch them all over without their permission.

"Dammit! If only Mother wasn't so sick...!"

"Th-That's right! You two would be knocked to the ground in one second flat!"

“Oh yeah?” Akane prodded. “You two have a mom, huh? Do you take care of her?” Akane asked in a tone that contrasted with the angry tone of the foxes. She came from the Lower House, where orphans were gathered. She never knew her parents, so she must have had strong feelings about the thought of motherhood. “There’s a saying where I come from... Your parents might not be there when you’re ready to pay them back. Keep that in mind, little foxies.”

“Wh-What you know about Mother, you freak!?”

“Brother! I feel like she made fun of us!”

Akane listened to them with an amused smile, when the exasperated Mynk came between them, fearing that the conversation would never end if left alone.

“Hey, what are the other Anima doing? It feels weird that I’m saying this, but it’s too quiet around here.”

“Hmph! I bet they’re obeying Mother’s mother,” the blue fox answered.

“Um...” Mynk’s eye widened. “Who’s Mother’s mother?”

Despite Mynk’s question, the blue fox kept his mouth shut and turned away like he was throwing a tantrum. Mynk had no way of knowing that the venerated dragon who ruled the land had ordered the Anima to ‘let them be.’ The mere fact that the dragon, who seldom spoke in thousands of years, had made an utterance of any kind was an earth-shattering event for the Anima. They must have felt like lightning had struck them from somewhere high above the clear sky. There were Anima who were born to fight, like tiger-hybrids, but even species like them kept quiet with their ears drooped, giving much gravity to the dragon’s order.

“So, you don’t plan to do anything with us, at least for now?”

“Hmph...” The Blue fox didn’t say any more, but his attitude was crystal clear. Albeit with some skepticism, Mynk sighed in relief. She knew very well that they wouldn’t stand a chance against a full-fledged Anima battalion.

“You heard them, Akane. It looks like there’s no immediate danger. Let’s go back to that cottage to—”

“Hmm. I bet Hakuto did something behind the scenes.”

“What?”

“That’s how it always goes,” Akane quietly added, with a shade of loneliness on her expression. “Before I know it, everything’s been teed up.” In the world where the Empire existed, Hakuto Kunai had employed every plot and scheme imaginable, defeating and eventually killing all political enemies he had. Most of the time, the job was already done before Akane found out anything about it. The closed-door politicking and scheming wasn’t her scene. Ren, Hakuto Kunai’s secretary, was always the one to organize and outline information. Yu gathered, and sometimes manipulated, various data to aid the Empire, while Tahara did so with his strategic forethought. Light had disappeared from Akane’s eyes. “It wasn’t my place...”

“Wh-What are you talking about...?” Mynk could feel a chill run down her spine at the shift in Akane’s tone. The foxes leapt away from Akane, staring her down with caution.

“So, there’s no point in *not* going rogue! Come on, Emo. Let’s go!”

“H-Hey!”

“Reckless is my middle name! Black Lancers, initiate! Let’s tear ‘em up!”

“No!”

Mynk’s cry fell on deaf ears as Akane grabbed and carried Mynk with her over the border, leaping into a place where no human had entered before, as if she was taking them on a picnic.

After watching the pair storm away, the blue fox muttered with mixed emotions, “Why would Mother’s Mother...”

“That evil human with the scary look must have threatened Mother’s Mother with his terrifying face!”

“That criminal-looking, evil human...”

While some of that was unwarranted, their guess wasn’t entirely groundless. The dragon seemed to recognize the Demon Lord, and had told the Anima to not interfere with him, for whatever reason. Akane’s preconception wasn’t

entirely off-base either, which was a terrifying notion, indeed.

“B-But Brother... The evil human kicked that cursed devil in the gut.”

“Right. Then he slapped him real hard...” The foxes gradually grew smiles on their faces, recalling how that Grand Devil, who had been threatening their divine realm, was smacked around like an ill-behaving child. “That devil! He was crying a little! There were tears in his eyes, for sure!”

“That vexed look on his face! Good riddance! Hee hee hee!”

“Maybe that evil human isn’t all evil, after all!”

“I agree, Brother! If he comes back, we’ll at least give him a bowl of rice with hot water.”

The foxes gleefully laughed at what must have been the first good thing to happen to them in a long time. The red fox must have been too young to know that a bowl of rice with hot water was often seen as the antithesis of hospitality.

As their laugh echoed through the divine realm, Akane and Mynk sensed the air shift around them. They were no longer surrounded by clean, fresh air, but tangibly murky air. They had entered a land forbidden to humans. Even the trees in the forest seemed stained with darkness.

“Eek, it’s getting all serious around here. I just want to keep up the good vibes.”

“How out of touch are you...? But, we can get out of here whenever we want with those weird shoes of yours, right? Right!?”

“You mean Partner Number Two? Can’t Quick Travel during combat,” Akane mercilessly answered. In fact, commands like Quick Travel had always been disabled during combat. Back in the Game, players could not use Quick Travel until they defeated their enemy, engaged in combat for a certain amount of time, or ran out of their enemy’s range.

“What does that mean, that we *can’t* escape when it matters!? You know what, I just remembered that I had something to do—”

“Don’t give me the cold shoulder, Moody! C’mon, let me hear you put your

heart and soul into those spells!”

Akane carried on. They made it through the dark forest, then a valley, then into a desolate area with bare rocks and sand. There were countless monsters lurking in the areas that they had run through, but none of them picked up on the pair, since the effect of Akane’s special ability far exceeded the limits of their senses. Akane was something with unfair powers—someone who infiltrated enemy territory, snuck up behind her target, and had a *tanto* to their throat before anyone realized she was there. Many of the short stories that Akira Ono had written about her were similar to that. Sometimes she really sprung to action on her own, and other times Kunai had commanded her to do so in secret. Of course, those stories were all fictional, intended only to give the advisors a backstory. Even so, they were as real as anything else to Akane. (Is Hakuto gonna be mad? Ah, whatever. He was always happy when I came back with the head of the big boss we were fighting.)

Some enemies were impervious to any amount of covert scheming. The only way to take that kind of enemy out was with a violent act disguised as an accident. Hakuto Kunai had earned the title of the Secretary of the Department of Citizen Happiness Management. He was surrounded by those looking to rob him of his seat and/or power. By sheer numbers, Tahara was the advisor who took care of most such enemies. When it came to big game, like ministers, Akane had always volunteered herself to bring back their head before anyone could stop her. A good number of episodes illuminated Akane’s recklessness as a downfall, but she was irrefutably a big-game hunter, and had more than enough prizes to show for it. Her performance fluctuated the most out of all advisors.

“We’re here, Edgy.”

“We’re really... Wait, is it that?”

There was an unbearable sight in the plaza before them, its perimeters only defined by a lackluster wooden fence. There were countless caged humans and coffin-shaped monsters all over the place. With a bright red pond that must have been all blood in the center of it all. Any layman would have cried in horror, fainted, or at least frozen in fear. Even Mynk, after all of her brushes with death, could barely face the nightmarish sight before her.

“H-Heh heh...” She forced out a chuckle. “Now this is some darkness... My right eye...”

“Horrible... It reminds me of the old days.” A strange shade was on Akane’s expression, as if she was watching a scene in the far distance. The usual glimmer about her had vanished.

“Old days? When exactly are you talking about...? When that Demon Lord ruled the world?”

“Yep, that’s it. Lots of people in big arenas. They fought each other to the death. Until there was only one survivor.”

“Only one? Hold on... What are you talking about?” Mynk asked in her confusion. All she could imagine was some sort of sadistic entertainment.

“We all knew it was terrible, and we had to defend it anyway. It was the only place we could belong in that wide, wide world.” In fact, the advisors all had some sort of troubled past. As the Empire ruled over half of the entire world and still continued to invade and conquer, the Sleepless Castle was the only home left for any of them. Good and evil had no place in her life. Akane simply had to fight to survive, and to protect her home. “But there’s no Empire in this world...” Her eyes gleamed with a powerful flash of light.

While Mynk didn’t understand what Akane was talking about, it was painfully obvious that she fully intended to charge into the hellscape before them. “This ‘Empire’...” Mynk began to ask.

“It crumbled to the ground. So, we’re going to build a new home... With how he is now, Hakuto and I can make a brand new empire from scratch. Even a brand new world,” Akane continued, almost rambling, some sort of sick attachment or obsession on her face.

Mynk began to fear Akane more than the nightmare that lay before them. “What are you going to do...?” she asked with audible fear. She couldn’t help but perceive some deep abyss or dark grudge within this endlessly happy-go-lucky girl.

“Don’t worry, Moody... I think, this time, Hakuto’s going to build a good nation to rule.”

Mynk finally stitched together the conclusion that Akane must have been speaking of a nation that fell in the days of myths. Naturally, the Empire must have been something that the Fallen Angel Lucifer, Ruler of Night, had constructed. (The Demon Lord and his subjects are trying to revive a nation lost in the days of old...!) It seemed too obvious of an idea for anyone to entertain it before. An explanation as to why Lucifer had been revived, and why his subjects were acting this way. Their endgame, every event, the Demon Lord's actions, and what Akane had said all fell into place in Mynk's mind. (The days of myths... The nation that ruled the night... will return...?) While Mynk, being who she was, felt excitement beginning to swell at the idea, that would spell a rather dark future for most. (But the Demon Lord had taken out all of the monsters during the invasion in Rookie... This girl is about to attack a region ruled by Hellions...) The Demon Lord trying to revive his nation that once existed in the days of old... that was a motive Mynk could understand. However, that hypothesis wasn't consistent with their anti-Hellion behavior. "I need to ask you a few questions, Akane. Does the Demon Lord oppose the Hellions?"

"Hellions? Is that what *those* are called? They're just random spawns. Just walking XP," Akane answered matter-of-factly.

Then, a shocking sentence came back to Mynk. It was something the Demon Lord had said during an innocuous conversation with the paladin.

—*Monsters are simply feed to me...*

The Demon Lord had let this slip. In fact, monsters were merely walking SP to him. He wasn't lying.

"Do you see the Hellions as feed...?"

"I was never afraid of any players or monstrous chimeras. Only of him growing tired of me and tossing me away." A shadow crossed over Akane's expression, which returned to her brimming smile when she looked back up. Mynk was lost for words at her rapidly shifting emotions and expression. "Sorry that I dragged you out here, Emo. I *really* wanted a witness. Sometimes I don't get the credit when I jump the gun like this." No amount of contribution would serve her any good if no one was around to see it. In fact, quite a few of Akane's expository short stories had ended with a comedic twist of her not receiving

any credit for the rogue work she did. In other episodes, she often earned major credit only to let it get to her head and blow it. Although, these failure stories did contribute to her popularity among players.

Mynk sighed. "All right... We have to deal with the situation at hand."

"That's right! Grab some popcorn and enjoy the show."

"Huh...? Wait, you're going in *alone* !?"

"I can take those things by the thousands," Akane proudly declared, thumping her chest with her fist. There were easily 300 monsters crowded in the plaza, so this wasn't a situation Mynk could fathom anyone being optimistic about.

"Thanks for coming to see my show." Akane gave Mynk a wink, and charged straight towards the plaza.

In an instant, the head of a goblin that had just been swinging its club was now soaring through the air.

Akane Fujisaki

Race: Human — Age: 16

Weapon: **Dragon's Head and Serpent's Tail**

A pair of single-handed *tonfa* , which can be combined to form a staff. One has a dragon painted on it, the other has a serpent.

Armor: **Smiles Invite Good Luck**

While Akane usually wears an outfit that resembles a Japanese high school uniform, she quick-changes into this Chinese dress for combat. As its name suggests, it deters evil.

Item: **Roller Blades**

The user expends drastically more Stamina for every action. As it boosts the user's Dexterity by 20, it was an extremely valuable item in the Game. Akane calls her pair "Partner Number One."

Item: **Moon Shoes**

It reduces the user's Stamina expenditure for actions and allows them to Quick Travel to anywhere the user has been. Players could exchange a large amount of Empire Mints for this item. Akane calls her pair "Partner Number Two."

Level: 1 — HP: 8000 — Stamina: 600 — Attack: 65+50 — Defense: 20+30 — Dexterity: 120+20 — Magic: 0 — Magic Defense: 0+20

Equipped Skills: First: **Master of the Staff** Second: **Sweep Kick** Second Dash: **Blinking Kick** Third: **Southern Shaolin Cross Fist**

Combat Skills: **Pathfinder, Lock-on, Instinct, Hunter, High-and-Mighty, Collector, Avenger, Wheel Turner, Wrath, Obliterate, Equal to None, Limit Breaker, Break Through**

Survival Skills: **Taste Test, Bloodhound, Bubbly, Recover, Fighting Spirit, In One Ear and Out the Other, Lucky Star, Hawkeye, Medicine, Treasure Hunter, Mint Master**

Duel Skill: **Ultimate Overdrive**

Special Skills: **Secret Agent, Supersonic, Crimson, ?**

One of the advisors who defended the Sleepless Castle. Her bubbly, happy-go-lucky personality garnered popularity from the players to the point that she was nicknamed the 'Idol of Sleepless Castle.' In fact, the game hosted numerous trinket items and trophies that were related to her. According to her backstory, she never knew her parents and grew up in the Empire-run orphanage, separated into Upper House and Lower House. The Upper House was home to the children of the aristocracy with extenuating circumstances, while the Lower House was home to abandoned children and those orphaned from war. Bullying of Lower children by the Upper children was rampant, but Akane and her fiery spirit took them head on, and protected many of her fellow students from suffering that fate. A good partner to another advisor, Ren Miyaoji, who lived in the Upper House at the same orphanage.

Intruder

As he heard the groans of agony around him, Hummer timidly accepted the piece of bread given to him. He was the middle-aged man down on his luck, who took a job on a ship and ended up in the slave market in Hellion territory.

“Are you doing all right, Mister Hummer?”

“Oh...! Y-Yes!” Hummer snapped out of his trance and looked up to find the beautiful princess Cake.

“Keep your spirits up... I think— Oh, I’m sorry! Who am I to tell you... Oh...”

“N-No, thank you for always trying to cheer me up...!” Hummer couldn’t stop thinking about how this little girl fought to live in this hellishly place, giving hope to the slaves while risking her own life. How incredibly noble.

“Mister Hummer, will you take this...?”

“Wait, that’s—”

“Hush! Don’t show anyone. Hee hee.”

Cake discreetly handed him a single cherry. The little red droplet seemed like life itself to Hummer. “H-How did you...?” he asked.

“They gave a few to me. I’ve actually been here a while.” Cake gave a little smile.

Hummer was nearly brought to tears at how delicate her smile was. He wondered how such a wonderful girl ended up in this place, and more importantly, how she survived on her own for so long.

“Make sure you eat it under your blanket, so no one else sees. Bye!”

“O-Okay!” Hummer deeply bowed and crawled under his blanket. The cherry he tossed into his mouth was delicious enough to make him cry. Its sweetness and freshness even revitalized his will to live. (For her sake, I need to make it out of here alive...!) The funny thing about humans was that a little thing like this could hold a broken heart together, or even embolden them with resolve.

Cake continued to speak to the slaves, handing hardened bread and murky water to them. Even though the meal was poor, it made the enslaved smile.

More so than the meal itself, the brief conversations with Cake seemed to give each of them a reason to live. She was, almost literally, a beautiful flower blooming in hell. The princess, obviously sorrowed by the hellish environment, returned to her own tent.

(Dammit! They're getting whacked ahead of schedule... At this rate, I'll be on the chopping block soon!) Her step seemed to hasten as her frustration grew. Some goblins who managed the Slave Market were swarming around, but hurried to part the way. They hadn't forgotten that, just the other day, one of them was killed by Kale, and the execution had been done with the most painful method imaginable. A rumor spread among the goblins that this particular human should not be messed with.

Just as she passed them, Cake whispered to a Goblin something that felt like a dagger in its ear. "Hey, Goblin. Go get better water."

"W-Who do you think..."

"I'll tell Master Kale that you're neglecting slave maintenance."

"Y-You little... Gragh...!"

Cake scoffed at the lack of a comeback and went into her tent. While her ability to switch between a façade and her true self so cleanly was becoming of a princess, one might have been concerned for her future in more ways than one.

Once in the tent, Cake read the large sheet of paper. "Shit! I only sent three of them to Stage Two..." The paper listed various numbers under headers that read 'Stage One,' 'Stage Two,' and 'Stage Three.' Evidently, the Slave Market she was in now was 'Stage One,' which had the most fluctuating list of numbers compared to the other two. "If I can just get some more of them in... Maybe prisoners of war..." Cake muttered a wish that completely contradicted her frail appearance.

Her job was to send people from Stage One to Two. Human slaves were all sent on this course, starting with Stage One, which was practically a dump. They were here to be toyed with, beaten, and/or killed for minor entertainment. Its customer base mostly consisted of lowly Orcs, savage Ogres, and low-level Vampires. Those who survived this atrocious environment without losing their

sanity were sent to Stage Two. At Stage Two, the slaves were given a clean environment, ample food, and comfortable shelter, but they were thoroughly trained and brainwashed. Only those who successfully completed this process were sent to Stage Three. Those who were deemed unsatisfactory were naturally returned to Stage One. Stage Three was the true Slave Market, and the slaves who made it that far had certifiably survived the most abominable environments. The best of the best. And the Slave Market thrived on that reputation. While there were various forms of slave trade throughout Hellion territory, the other Grand Devils didn't put this much effort into refining the quality of their human slaves. Belphegor was the only one among them to employ such a system. He was lazy, lustful, and preferred a long journey above all... For him, tormenting Olgan was just another form of killing time. A way for him to relish the excess.

"I gotta do something before that fucker shows up again..." Cake snarled, holding the hand that had been stabbed. There was no telling what the devil would do when he came back. He might pluck her eyes out, cut off her fingers, tear off all of her nails... Recalling the devil's sadistic laugh, Cake shuddered from head to toe. "We can't get jack shit around here... Might have to snag some food from Stage Two, using *his* name." It was a gutsy move, but Cake was certain that the cruel demon would only laugh at and enjoy her struggle. In fact, she might only add fuel to his sadism if she remained stagnant and did nothing but cry over her situation. "Now's my chance when the goblins are shitting themselves... I'm going to milk every last drop out of this."

Cake hardened her resolve and walked over to a tent that looked far too nice to be there. A Hellknight, a monster that worked directly for the Count Impaler, was sitting within the tent. A Hellknight was a sort of general to an army of Skeleton Warriors and Haunts. This powerful monster would not suffer a scratch from any human, barring an extremely powerful cleric like Mynk.

"I-I've come to make a request..." Even Cake couldn't help but let her voice shake facing this terrifying monster. The Hellknight only slightly turned its head and remained silent. His entire body was covered in a thick set of armor, concealing whatever was inside it, as well as any facial expressions. "I would like a carriage to Stage Two... Master Kale has, um, given me an order..."

The Hellknight remained silent for a few moments, before beginning to move his body here and there. Even Cake, who prided herself on her observational skills, couldn't pick up on any thoughts through the armor. After some time in silence that seemed to last for eternity, the Hellknight finally spoke. "Why does the Count keep such an unscrupulous one around...?" Cake, trembling with fear, figured that he must mean Count Impaler, who managed the Slave Market—the right-hand man to the Grand Devil Belphegor. "Such a lowly creature is unworthy to be near our noble Count..." the Hellknight grumbled. Then, having sensed something, the monster leapt out of the chair it had been sitting in and knelt on the ground, facing a skull.

The skull's eyes gleamed with an eerie light, and its jaw began to flap. "Simple. Our King seems fascinated with that one..."

"Forgive my insolence, Noble Count. I shall pay for it with my head."

"No need. My thoughts on the matter are not so different from yours." Black aura gathered around the skull, which soon formed a silhouette.

The silhouette formed and became Count Impaler, dressed like a stereotypical noble. His dreadful aura caused Cake to instinctively grovel, pushing her forehead against the ground. While she felt terror, she acted on an animalistic instinct to keep the Count out of her sight. It felt as if the mere act of looking at him made her life force leave her body.

"The king prefers detours and revels in pointlessness. Perhaps he feels a sort of kinship to that Kale."

"Yes, My Lord!" The Hellknight remained where it was, not daring to oppose the Count in any way. Cake, too, was intently listening to every word that he muttered, in the hopes of being able to use it to her advantage someday.

"When the king is driven mad with desire and burns mad with lust, he tends to his work with passion. Once the fire dies, however, he returns to spending idle days. A difficult master to serve, let me assure you." The Count sat on a chair and smirked his lipless mouth. Genuine woe flashed over his face. "If not for his sloth, he would have gained control of all Hellion territory by now."

"Noble Count... If the king shall rule all territory, he may lose interest in everything, and may halt... or 'stop' altogether."

“Ha! You’re right about that! That is one of my concerns as well. The king requires an enemy. Something of interest. Something to occupy his mind, above all.”

As she listened to the ominous yet bizarre conversation, Cake couldn’t help but wonder what would happen to the world outside of Hellion territory if these monsters found their way out there, somehow.

“Kale is toying with that human there?” the Count asked.

“Yes! Apparently she wants to travel to Stage Two.”

“That’s all fine, and you should accompany her there. I’m sure your spirits are low from staying in such a dark corner for so long. You may rest for a while in Stage Two.”

“I’m unworthy of such kindness!” The Hellknight rubbed his helmet into the ground, shriveling with gratitude.

While the title of ‘Count Impaler’ had foreboding connotations, Cake was rather impressed by how well he seemed to treat his subjects. She kept her head down as before, and internally shouted in victory. (Hell yeah! Now I got a pass from *this* monster! No one’s going to fuck with me now!) She had gambled by lying about an order from Kale, but gained permission from the Count, Belphegor’s right-hand man, in return. This should give her some freedom, even in Stage Two. Who in this land could defy the order of Count Impaler?

Following the Hellknight, Cake climbed into the carriage, her heart skipping. Soon, the carriage began to roll away, and the familiar sight of the Slave Market passed them by.

“U-Um... Master Knight...?” Cake had attempted speaking to the Hellknight a few times to gain some information, but received only silence in return. It seemed that it had no intention of speaking to a mere human. Compared to how gleeful it seemed speaking to the Count, Cake felt like she was sitting across from a statue. (Hmph! Keep it up... I’m going to break out of this place, no matter what it takes.)

Cake had survived thus far in the literal hell of Stage One; her mental tenacity was beyond her age, and her heart was distorted just as much. (All thanks to my

useless shitbag of a father...) She vividly remembered the glory days of Palma, when it stood as a powerful kingdom, and Cake had spent her days in peaceful luxury as the princess. Those times, however, crumbled to the ground one fateful day. A declaration of war from the up-and-coming New Kingdom of Xenobia, whose ruler had begun to earn the moniker of “the Little Conqueror of the North,” had destroyed Cake’s life.

(All because of that deadbeat, shit-brained, sack-of-garbage, Daddy Douchebag kept Leon away...!) She recalled the hero who protected her country through tough battles, and even dealt catastrophic damage to Xenobia. (Leon *can’t* be dead... If I can only find him...) She couldn’t help but tighten her fists, imagining crimson flames. (Beatrice... Kongming... I will skin you both alive!) Cake squeezed her eyes shut, picturing the two people in this world whom she could kill a thousand times over. Ironically, the only thing that kept Cake alive through sipping dirt in this place was her plan for revenge.

The carriage rolled on, carrying a stone-silent Hellknight and a princess burning for vengeance. Their destination was a lavish facility, Stage Two of the Slave Market. Through thorough conditioning and brainwashing, the slaves here were wiped clean of their previous lives and any semblance of personality. In terms of dehumanization, both Stage One and Two were equally hellish.

Back at Stage One, Count Impaler exited the tent. (It’s been a while since I last visited here...) The plaza brightly illuminated the night with ample Light Spell Stones. These were set up with consideration for the slaves, so they could watch their comrades being tortured to death at all hours of the day. The theory was that these slaves would only be worthy of their price after surviving this madness. (The smell of blood and rotting flesh, curses and screams of agony in the air... This place is ever so pleasant.)

When the goblins spotted Count Impaler, they straightened their backs as if they were struck by lightning, and began darting around the place with dexterous efficiency the likes of which they had never shown before. Even the Orcs and Ogres who were there as paying customers bent their necks in utter submission. The Kobolds, who came to Stage One for the cheap price rather than any quality, followed suit. The low-level vampires who were gleefully soaking in the blood pond rushed to get out, but the Count stopped them with

a graceful motion of the hand. The vampires cast their gazes down, turning completely silent lest they risk offending the Count in any way. No creature spoke nor looked up from the ground. It was a bizarre sight to behold. Count Impaler did occasionally stop by the Slave Market unannounced to do a sort of inspection. While his job included checking the quality of product and work, his inspections were largely motivated by his extremely sadistic tendencies that contrasted his gentlemanly demeanor.

“Hmm... This won’t do,” he observed. “This elderly man has injured his leg.”

“Ahh! N-No, I-I’m fine!”

“You mustn’t exert yourself so much. A few of your toes have already rotted off.” Black air gathered in the Count’s left hand, and a spear materialized from it... if one could call it that. The weapon seemed like the embodiment of dread. Ghostly images floated in and out of the weapon, groaning in agony.

“P-Please, wait! I’m still alive! I can still—!”

The Count stabbed the old man with the spear without another word. The weapon struck clean through a bar of the cage and into the old man’s gut. He groaned for a while, before his body began to rapidly shrivel up until he turned into a mummified state. The Count cackled at the sight of the old man turning into literal skin and bone. The old man’s carcass lacked lips to cover his teeth, which made the body even more disturbing.

The goblins who had been in charge of the cage rushed over, all apologizing to the Count.

“F-Forgive us...!”

“Q-Quality will be maintained at the highest standard!”

“It’s all right. Failure is the mother of success, they say,” the Count graciously said, causing the goblins to gratefully bow. “However,” the Count added. The goblins froze. “What is the point of a nose that cannot smell rotting flesh? As it’s clearly of no use to you, I’ll be holding onto it.” The Count grabbed one of the goblins by the head and tore off its nose as if he was picking a mushroom. The goblins screamed at the much-too-cavalier administration of this punishment. “In a line, now. We can’t keep useless things lying around our

precious market.”

“P-Please... W-We’ll never make this mistake again! We swear!”

“My. It seems you have no use for your ears, either...” the Count lamented, and tore the nose off of the goblin who just spoke, as well as its ears, like he was merely ripping the corner of a sheet of paper. The matter-of-fact procession of this sadistic show silenced the entirety of the Slave Market. After watching this, the goblins began running through the market, desperate to weed out any damaged merchandise.

“This one bad!”

“This one, too! Taking it out!”

“N-No! Please! I’m not hurt!”

“Please, have mercy! If you take me, my child will...!”

The goblins began dragging merchandise in any questionable states out of their cages. They seemed to figure that they would not suffer the same fate as those goblins if they took care of damaged merchandise before the Count’s inspection reached them. One of the goblins raised its club, ready to crack the head of a woman holding a child. Suddenly, a head did explode—the head of the goblin who had raised its club.

“Ta-da! Akane to the rescue!” A completely out-of-place voice rang through the Slave Market, accompanied by a cute peace sign from Akane. “That’s V, for Victory.”

The goblin that was standing next to the one whose head was just blown off stood motionless, unable to register what had happened. “Hi-ya!” Akane, as if she came straight out of a kung-fu movie, roundhouse kicked the second goblin in the side of its head, which separated its upper and lower body, sending its torso flying across the market. Whether or not one could call that a ‘kick’ could certainly be debated. “It’s my debut match here, so let’s make it count! Where’s the big boss, huh!? *Sniff sniff sniff...* ”

Count Impaler watched the sudden intruder with curiosity before sensing something curious about her, and shifted his stance to one of caution. He had detected a cleric, which he loathed. Even the fearsome Count couldn’t help but

brace himself as he saw that the intruder was a powerful user of the Holy element. At this point, a question finally popped into the Count's mind. (How did I not notice such a large presence approaching the Market until now...?) Devils of the Haunt variety, like the Count, were very sensitive to Holy powers. It should have been impossible for him not to notice such a presence come this close. Before he could find an answer to his question, the intruder approached.

This was the very moment that ignited the catastrophic battle that was felt all around Hellion territory.

Mynk

Race: Human — Age: 20

Weapon: **Star-Cross**

Special effect against the Demonic — a mere touch inflicts damage. This weapon explosively increases the user's power in Holiness. Mynk utilizes this item to cast class-4 spells.

Armor: **Angelic Coat**

This is not physical armor, but a holy coating generated by a class-4 spell. It boasts an impressive Defense and Magic Defense buff, making it difficult for weak monsters to even get near Mynk.

Item: **The Black Book**

Despite what Mynk calls it, it is a bona fide Holy Scripture. The First Book of Holy Scripture, in fact, considered the best of them all. It drastically increases the power of Holy magic.

Level: 20 — HP: ? — Stamina: ? — Attack: 21+18 — Defense: 17+18 — Dexterity: 22 — Magic: 18+10 (Holy +12) — Magic Defense: 18+10

One of the Star Players, the best and most famous adventurers on the continent. Her mentality resembles that of an emo teenager, complete with a pretend 'cursed' eye. If not for her 'outbursts,' Mynk would be a thoroughly normal and level-headed person.

Showtime!

Sensing a powerful holiness, Count Impaler instinctively hid himself. He appeared to be consumed by a cloud of black mist, rapidly disappearing into it. Soon, any semblance of his existence, let alone his appearance, was hidden. (I doubt such an aggressive presence managed to blend into the slaves. Could it be an agent sent in by the Anima?) Then, the Count reconsidered. Would the prideful Anima go through the trouble of using a human, whom they consider to be inferior? The Count didn't think so. (More likely, they're a suicide-attacker sent in by another territory.) The Hellion territories were war-torn, as each of

the Grand Devils, bearers of the seven great sins, were always fighting over land. Each devil greatly varied in character, and some preferred sabotage and scheming. When the Count returned his attention to his surroundings, he found that Akane was working to exterminate the goblins in the area.

“Five, six, seven, eight...!” As if she was dancing, Akane maneuvered to and fro with blinding speed and rhythm. While her attacks alone were simply punches and kicks, she unleashed them with incredible speed.

(Not bad for a human. I suppose their aim is for that one to cause a distraction so the other one can come after me.) He sensed only one other new presence beside Akane. He almost wanted to commend them for their bravery, if they had truly dared to attack with just the two of them. (We devils struggle to deal with the Holy element. An expert wielder of it could prove to be a powerful foe. Perhaps using humans in our wars isn’t as fruitless as it seems.) The Holy element was an elevation of Light, which naturally made it impossible for devils to wield. In fact, even building up a resistance was nearly impossible for them. On the other hand, clerics were weak to the elements of Dark and Black magic. When a cleric faced off against a devil, it was a no-guard, bare-knuckle match. (Humans are weak, but occasionally spawn outliers... This won’t be a simple kill-and-done. We must break their spirits and keep them chained.) Belphegor and Count Impaler aimed to turn the entire human race into livestock, and considered it the best answer to them. The Slave Market was a sort of prototype for that operation.

Meanwhile, Akane’s movement became more and more nonsensical. Even during combat, she began striking bizarre, frilly poses as if to an invisible audience. “Listen to my song! See you at the ends of the Empire!” Rambling otherworldly nonsense, Akane accelerated. She was toying with these goblins, tapping one’s forehead with her fingers, kicking one in the temple, throwing a chop at the back of another’s head, and even pinching one’s chin and slapping their face around.

The goblins raged at being played like little dolls.

“The human’s dead meat!”

“Tear it limb to limb, and eat it from the fingers-up!”

Akane countered: “*Omae wa mou shinde iru... !*” with a charming, jokester smile.

The goblins looked dumbfounded, then burst out laughing. Whatever she had said, they hadn’t felt a smidgen of pain from her previous barrage of attacks. “Human... Don’t you think—!?” The head of the goblin whose forehead Akane had tapped suddenly exploded. Then, the one who received a light kick to the temple was decapitated. The one who took a chop to the back of the head had it sliced in half. The torso of the one who was slapped around twisted to and fro, until it popped like a full balloon. Silence fell over the Slave Market in the wake of this inexplicable phenomenon. The truth, however, was much simpler. Akane’s attacks were so fast that the effects came at a delay.

“It looks like you kids killed a bunch of people for sport, so I think I’ll kill you all and have fun doing it. That’s fair, don’t you think?” Akane’s face wore a shadow of malice. The purity of her smile made it even more intimidating. One that made it seem like there might have been some stickiness encasing her heart.

The Count almost wanted to send Akane a round of applause. (Bravo...!) he simply thought. There was no rhyme or reason to it. He simply felt a powerful sense of kinship in her. He, too, had once been an ordinary Skeleton Warrior. A rare, mutated individual, after an eon of time, he continued to evolve. The Count remembered the days when he thirsted for strength and attention, always striving to improve his environment. He felt almost mystically sympathetic for the stickiness within Akane. Just as the Count felt the urge to reveal himself, an overwhelming squall of Holy element poured down onto him. Burning pain seized his entire body, and trails of black smoke rose from where the magic hit his skin. (Here it comes...!) The Count silently turned towards the other intruder whom he had been devoting much of his attention to. While the Count got off with nothing more than those burns, the coffin-shaped monsters around him, the Iron Maidens, screamed and shriveled into dust.

“You’ve kept me waiting, mademoiselle,” the Count called to Mynk.

“T-Trying to play it cool, are you...? Prepare to face the darkness that preys on darkness.”

Akane looked surprised for a moment at Mynk's sudden emergence from behind her, before a pout appeared on her face. It was as if someone had rushed onto her stage mid-song. "Hey, hey, hey, trying to steal the spotlight from me...? But it's okay, Edgequeen. I'll do a duet with you."

Mynk wasn't having any of Akane's nonsense. She had been sensing the piercing glare of Count Impaler this entire time. "Stop fooling around! Do you know how scared I was with that monster staring at me this entire time!?"

"Huh? The one with the top hat?"

"I finally figured out where he was, so I tried to one-shot him with Abyssal Rain. It barely scratched him, that thing is crazy!"

"Yeah, he looks like a field boss."

As he listened to the intruders' conversation, the Count outspread his arms and summoned his subjects. A number of shadows emerged from the dark energy in the air, a fearsome band of Haunts called the Skeletal Seven. Each of them could take on an A- rank adventurer, but more terrifyingly, they were as coordinated as a veteran team of human adventurers. Encountering them in a dungeon would spell certain death for most.

"Woah! Look at all of those skeletons! Hail Mary had a little lamb..."

"The Skeletal Seven? When Olgan's not even here... What am I supposed to do...?"

"Why don't you just... try smiling?"

"As if!"

Akane gave a whole-hearted smile and charged into the Skeletal Seven, seemingly without a plan. One of them immediately swung its sword down at her, only to cut the air. In the blink of an eye, the head of the skeleton behind it shattered to pieces, and the one with the sword had its backbone snapped in half. Akane dodged, threw a punch and roundhouse kick, and jumped back all in one breath. Both Mynk and the Count were astonished.

(Oh? The Skeletal Seven are more durable than they look. There's more than speed to this girl.) The remaining five, with visible caution, assumed a formation

with a tank in front, two attackers in the middle, and a pair of skeletons doing spell incantations in the rear. An impeccable coordinated response.

For some reason, Akane watched the maneuver with awe. “Wow, you guys remind me of the players. Brings back some memories.”

The tank charged as the attackers emerged from behind it to either side, in an attempt to pincer Akane. While an ordinary fighter may have panicked at the rapid-fire attack, Akane was staring down the two skeletons in the very back.

“Flaming Bird...!”

“Flaming Arrow...!”

A bird-shaped roaring flame and an arrow coated with a mass of fire fell towards Akane from above.

Despite being cornered, Akane seemed terribly at peace. “Thanks for the bright spotlight, Bones.” She side-stepped the Flaming Bird by an inch, and grabbed the arrow with her bare hand. “Hot, hot, hot! I don’t really want this, so I’ll give it back.” Akane threw the arrow into the tank, piercing through its shield and bones. The attackers froze at the sudden counter. Akane seized that opening to leap high into the air, striking down on the heads of the two skeletons in the back with the chop of her hands. “Hiii-ya!” As if she had swung sledge hammers at them, both skeletons shattered into pieces. “Okie, Moody. You can play with the other two.”

“Huh...?”

“You think Mister Top Hat’s worth a lot of points? Are you supposed to be important? I could go for a snack.” Akane muttered some unstable-sounding things as she approached Count Impaler.

Mynk, left alone and confused, hurriedly produced her Holy Scripture she liked to call the Black Book, and immediately began incanting a spell to protect herself. “Bless me with abyssal darkness, so I may extinguish all light...!”

—Angelic Coat

Mynk rattled on the incantation, almost recklessly. Holy fabric materialized to protect Mynk on her hands, the back of her neck, and her waist, explosively

boosting her Defense. The remaining members of the Skeletal Seven cursed the blinding light that the Holy element emanated. It wrought pain and suffering to Haunts by its mere existence, which evidenced how refined Mynk's Holy magic was. "I can handle two of them... You've wandered into our world, lost flowers. Disperse with the wind!"

"Ooh, I love me that emo! Make them learn that their actions have consequences!"

"Stop fooling around, and take care of that monster, please! You know what, no please! Just do it!"

"I don't know if I'm ready to accept a corporate sponsorship..."

"Erg, I miss you Olgaaan!"

Count Impaler watched the pair of humans with some amusement and curiosity. These were different from any humans he had seen before. Too different. "Your cheerfulness is very refreshing. Especially around these parts."

"You think so? You look like a weirdo to me."

"Weird...? True, I am a rare example of an anomaly."

"No, I'm just wondering why you're so calm when you're about to die."

The Count couldn't process Akane's words for a moment, until it clicked. "I see. You're very confident in your abilities, mademoiselle. And I've encountered many formidable fighters like you... And watched as they groveled for their lives at the end."

"All those memories'll be gone, soon. You are going to die."

The Count cackled at Akane's insistence with death. He was unkillable, after all. "I might have mentioned that I am an anomaly... Unbound by death. In fact, I long for an experience to stand at the edge of it."

"Uh-oh. That's what we call 'foreshadowing' in the biz."

Sensing that Count Impaler was about to enter combat, the orcs, ogres, and low-ranking vampires swarmed at the scene to protect him. "No need," the Count called to them. "But I think the mademoiselle over there could use some company." The monsters then rushed towards Mynk, which wasn't a laughing

matter for a normal human mid-combat with two of the Skeletal Seven.

“What the— Why are the monsters coming my way!?”

“Get yourself together, Edgy! What’s cooler than a sardonic grin in the face of adversity?”

“A grin!? Now!?”

As the two bickered, Count Impaler raised his spear in a leisurely manner. His elegant demeanor, even in the middle of a battlefield, exuded the air of purebred nobility. “Now, mademoiselle... Shall we duel?”

“Ready when you are.”

Just as Akane finished her sentence, a whirlwind launched from a thrust assaulted her. She twisted her body to dodge the attack, which was followed by a horizontal swipe. An ordinary human would have been cut in two, right at the waist. However, Akane avoided the attack by leaping high into the air.

“You’re light on your feet. Have you any magical item that controls the wind?”

“What? That sounds epic! Where can I get one?” Akane was all about treasures, rarities, and limited editions. She couldn’t help but let her imagination run about this.

“If you wish to get your hands on one, you should try and defeat me. Our king’s castle has unimaginable tr—” A deep punch to the sternum cut the Count short. “Grah...!”

“Thanks for the tip. I’ll take all that treasure, don’t worry.”

“You mustn’t get carried away...!” Count Impaler took his distance before unleashing a storm of thrusts with his spear.

Akane dodged them all with ease, muttering in sing-song: “Can’t hurt to have a bunch of money and treasure for making our new nation. Ren should come over soon, maybe I’ll build a house just for the two of us. The possibilities are endless.”

“Unfortunately, that won’t be possible...!” The spear changed shape into what resembled a giant alligator snout, chomping with its tooth-like blades.

Akane just barely avoided its bite. “Woah! That’s kind of gross!”

“Sorry to surprise you. My spear loves to feed on lively prey like you.”

“I may be a superstar, but I don’t want *that* for a fan. Not like Tahara and his guns... I don’t want to be one of *those* people.” Akane muttered something that Tahara would have scolded her for with a silent punch to the head, if he had heard.

Count Impaler seemed somehow gleeful to have encountered a worthy foe. Both he and his master Belphegor had not encountered anyone close to an even match for so long. Even the internal struggles within Hellion territory were more of a real-life board game than a full-on war. Expanding their territory was merely a performance of their strength to them, done solely for the purpose of stroking their ego. The situation was mostly the same for the other Grand Devils, too. They mostly performed intimidation and displays of their forces, fought on occasion, and retreated before the water got too hot... so they could each claim victory as loud as they could. In other words, these battles were like professional wrestling, and they seemed to consider it foolish for such powerful forces to try and kill each other for real. The only ones that would benefit from a full-on Hellion war were the humans and Anima.

“Perhaps it’s time for me to show you a glimpse of my true power.”

“Wha?”

“One doesn’t seem to cut it with you, mademoiselle.” The Count raised his hand, and a skull began to materialize. This was called Double, a move most often used by high-rank devils. By giving a portion of their strength to a catalyst, they could make it autonomous. The skull changed its shape until it became another Count Impaler.

“Huh...!? Shadow Clone Jutsu!?” Akane shouted with amazement.

Making a Double was truly like copying oneself, which made it a technique impossible to use without incredible strength. Count Impaler operated multiple Doubles at once, making him exceptional even among high-rank devils. “I have four Doubles in addition to my true self. Do you understand what that means?”

“Nah, I’m not good at riddles.”

“You have only faced me at 20% of my full power, mademoiselle.”

“C’mon, I hate math and numbers and all that. My head goes *reeee* .”

“Ahaha! What an entertaining little girl.” As he cackled, the two Count Impalers overlapped and merged. Then, dark affliction oozed out of the count’s body. According to the Count, he was still only at 40% of his full potential. “I sincerely hope that you’ll continue to entertain me.”

Dodging a spear thrust, Akane let out a little cheer. She seemed to realize how much the Count’s speed and strength had improved. She parried the flurry of spear lunges with both hands and attempted to close in on the Count, when she noticed something. “Why do my hands hurt...?”

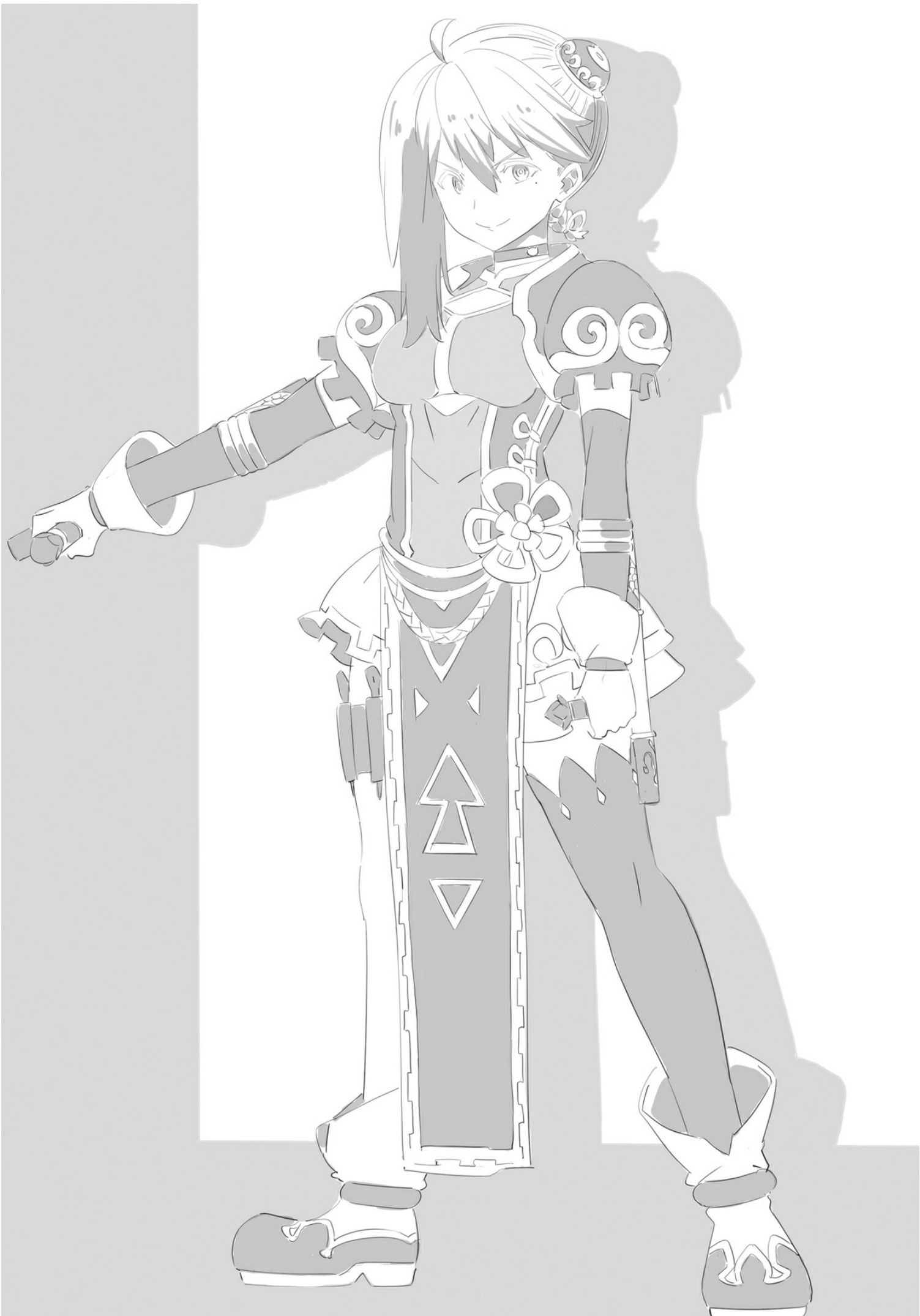
“This spear has mutated over thousands of years, storing up affliction along the way. Just like me, my trusty weapon has fallen outside the realm of worldly confines,” the Count said, as he couldn’t help but feel curious. Any ordinary human would have had their life force sucked out and been reduced to skin and bone just by touching the spear. (Perhaps the mademoiselle is protecting her hands with some sort of magical item. Or perhaps some powerful blessing...?) In truth, Akane held no such item nor had received any form of blessing. Her HP was simply beyond the scope of the Count’s imagination. While not quite as high as the Demon Lord, Akane’s HP was an astronomical 8000. Depleting all of that life force would have taken longer than anyone could imagine.

“Thought I parried them good... Not as good as Nomura, I guess,” Akane muttered, disgruntled, visibly disappointed. That being said, unarmed combat wasn’t her specialty, either. “Guess I should put on my big girl pants,” she declared, as if she wasn’t really in a fight at all until this moment. Count Impaler frowned at the notion, but would soon discover that she wasn’t bluffing. “Bibbity boppity abra kadabra, I wish I make a wish I might...!” With a nonsensical chant, Akane’s body lit up with a blinding light. His outfit that resembled a school uniform rapidly changed to a China dress, and even her hairstyle changed.

The Count’s jaw hit the floor and he let out a dry laugh. “Ha, ha ha... I’m starting to believe that you were *born* to surprise me.”

“For real? I think your clone-no-jutsu’s got more of a wow factor.” A strange

object appeared in each of Akane's hands: a set of *tonfa* she had named Dragon's Head and Serpent's Tail. This kind of weapon didn't exist in this world filled with swords, spears, axes, and bows. Akira Ono had given her this weapon in jest, referencing the Japanese saying that describes something that starts off very well, then quickly diminishes, since Akane's backstories often depicted her having a great start but ending up with nothing to show for it.



The count silently summoned another skull and hurriedly overlapped it onto himself, fusing with it. He had sensed an incredible threat from Akane's new look and weapon. A cold drop of sweat trickled down his back. He could almost hear the pounding of his non-existent heart.

"What, what? Making another clo— Double?"

"Can't be too careful..."

"Oh, you're... scared?"

Akane's look nearly swallowed up the Count like a bottomless pit, and he instinctively lunged with his spear. He couldn't bear the standoff against her anymore. Naturally, Akane wasn't there to be struck, but was behind the count. "If you *can* get to 100%, you better do it quick."

"Get away...!" The Count spun his spear around to strike Akane away, but she vanished without a trace before reappearing in place. Her Dexterity was far too high. She was so fast that even Tahara once grumbled that he didn't believe he could hit Akane once, even with a full-scale bullet hell generated by all the guns in his arsenal. A true monster of speed.

"You...!" The Count swung the spear down with all of his might, which was promptly knocked away by Akane's *tonfa* like a little mosquito in the air.

"Oops, there goes your spear. You've got some butter fingers."

"Grah..." the Count grunted, rushing to grab his weapon. He was beginning to grow dizzy at trying to comprehend what kind of creature he was facing. "One question, if I may... Which territory sent you, mademoiselle?"

"Territory?"

"Envy? Pride, perhaps? I know it wasn't Gluttony..."

"No idea what you're talking about. Let's get this over w—"

"Don't move, please." Count Impaler held its spear against a human in a cage to stop Akane in her tracks. He feared that he could lose the battle at this rate. "I commend your strength and bravery, mademoiselle. Truly. So, I would like to propose a deal."

“Huh? A deal?”

“As far as I can tell, you’re not after the life of my king. You haven’t even mentioned his name.” The Count guessed that Akane had no knowledge of, or even interest in, Belphegor. “In that case, I’m sure we can reach a compromise. Might I suggest switching to our side? I guarantee that you’ll be well treated.”

“Huh? No.”

Akane’s childish response took the Count by surprise. Despite Mynk being engaged in a deadly battle with countless monsters in the plaza behind them, these two were stuck in an awkward standoff. “I assume you feel pity for these people, and are trying to save them,” the Count said. “In that case, I have the power to release them all.” It was a bold proposal. Count Impaler valued recruiting this girl above the Slave Market.

Akane’s answer, however, was not what he had hoped for. “I don’t need your permission. Besides, Hakuto’s the only one who can boss me around. You think you can take his place? What a laugh.” Akane approached the Count silently step by step.

At each step, the Count’s hands shook more. “I told you not to move. At my command, the monsters will attack all of the humans in cages.”

The man having the spear pointed to him let out a pathetic yelp. It was Hummer, who had ended up here from the strangest chain of events.

“Don’t worry, dude. I’ll teach this bad guy a lesson.”

“H-Hel-Help me...” Hummer put his head down and groveled like a dog.

His portly body must have been quite amusing, as Akane burst out laughing. “Hey, I remember you! You have a gut that makes you look like you’ll roll back to a stand on your own when you fall down. Just like a big *daruma*!” Akane kept approaching, continuing to ramble nonsense.

The count must have seen her nonchalance as a threat for violent recourse. He leapt back to create space between them, and finally summoned the last Double. Excluding the original Count Impaler, who still remained in his king’s castle, all of his Doubles had been collected. “I never expected to use this one...” The count had prepared a Double in each Stage of the Slave Market, in

addition to this final one that he had saved for a rainy day. The four Doubles now became one, rapidly changing the Count's body. He grew as large as a building, as his skull became something more resembling a bull's skull, with two horns protruding from it. His torso and limbs became a giant concentration of countless bones, his arms thick enough to break through a castle wall with a single blow.

"You will regret that you've pushed me this far..." The Count's terrifying voice and appearance triggered cries from all over the Slave Market.

Even Mynk, who had just now defeated the remaining Skeletal Seven, jumped at the sight of the giant horror. "H-Hey! What is that!?"

"Hm? There are big chimeras in the arena, but humans are always the scariest creatures."

Before Mynk could ask what Akane meant, the Count raised his arm and swung it down. Akane dodged the attack with ease, but the impact quaked the entirety of the Slave Market.

"A-Akane! Do something! Aren't you the Fallen Angel's—the Demon Lord's—subject!?"

"Like I said, Hakuto's more of a con artist right now."

"What in the world are you talking about!?" For better or worse, all the remaining monsters that were surrounding Mynk had dispersed for fear of becoming collateral damage.

"Can you get everyone out of their cages, Edgy? I'll take care of this one."

"Okay, whatever! Just hurry!" Mynk, finally disengaged from combat, gave up on arguing with Akane and began smashing the cages around her.

Hummer, who was behind Akane, seemed unable to even stand. Who could have blamed him, when a mythical monster materialized right before his eyes? "The world... is coming to an end..." Hummer trembled from head to toe, tears overflowing from his eyes. He had resigned himself to death, having lost all hope of making it out of this situation. Even Mynk had lost the color in her face as if she had also come face to face with the end of the world. For a layman like Hummer, however, the Count had become devastation incarnate.

“Don’t worry, Daruma Man. It won’t take long for me to take it out with my *tonfa*. ” Akane charged towards Count Impaler, now composed of countless bodies’ worth of bones. His arm, now as thick as dozens of steel beams, swung across her path and tore numerous Iron Maidens into pieces, but Akane had vanished again. She leapt high into the air and swung her *tonfa* down at the arm. A sizable fracture ran through it before immediately healing.

“Woah!”

“As I have said, I am a being beyond the confines of death.”

“Hrm... What a weird bundle of bones.” As she dodged the swings of the Count’s arms, practically the embodiment of violence, she drew closer to his body. Akane slammed her *tonfa* into the Count’s torso, legs, and back, but all of the fractures and broken bones immediately restored to their former shapes.

“Your attacks are fruitless. My body will never deteriorate nor perish,” the Count proudly declared, relishing his own strength. An incredibly fast Regeneration, which was the gift bestowed upon Count Impaler. With this power, he had achieved an incredible course of evolution over an endless expanse of time.

“One, two, three, four!” Akane persisted with rhythmic strikes to the same result. All of the shattered bones simply regenerated themselves. As the Count laughed at the effort, Akane’s attacks only sped up. “I haven’t exercised in a while. Better brush up my form.” Apparently annoyed by her insistent attacks, the Count moved to squash Akane like a buzzing fly with both of his hands. When his hands collided with a thunderous clash, Akane hadn’t moved a step. Rather, she had easily stopped both hands with her pair of *tonfa*. “Did you OD on calcium, or something— Woah!” Akane dodged the Count’s annoyed headbutt by leaping backwards away from him.

The scene looked like a single fly was buzzing around a giant monster. The people of the Slave Market, who had been watching the entire exchange, cried out in hopelessness. Hummer, too, accepted his close-approaching death as he still trembled. He could see that the girl in bizarre clothes was powerful, but he couldn’t believe that she stood a chance against a monster straight out of the world of myths. “What’s the point in even...” Hummer muttered and trailed off.

What was the point of surviving? Even if he defied all odds and made it back to Rookie, the only thing waiting for him there was a miserable life of being ordered around. He had no savings, and his pay would only diminish as the years went on. Day after day, he would be bossed around and laughed at by young adventurers. What kind of life was that?

“I don’t like the sound of that, Daruma Man. If you give up, the game’s over.”

“Please, leave me behind and run... A girl like you must have a bright future ahead of you...”

The giant collection of bones approached them, shaking the earth with every step. It seemed to Hummer that the colossal being illuminated by the Light Spell Stones in the area was counting down the last moments of his life.

“What’s that supposed to mean? You don’t?”

“I’ve always made stupid mistakes, been pushed around all my life... The way you saw me in town was how my whole life was...” At the brink of death, Hummer seemed to long for a sort of confession. While he seemed completely resigned from life, he couldn’t see Akane’s expression as she had her back turned on him. The fact that he was pathetically spilling his guts to a young girl not even half of his age made Hummer feel even more miserable.

Akane remained silent, for once, as Hummer talked. She had spent her childhood in the Lower House being bullied by the Upper House students. The Lower House children were called hairless apes, useless weeds... That was the nature of her upbringing.

Akane quietly spoke. “There are a lot of bad things in this world... But you know, Daruma Man? If you just keep on going, there’ll be good things, too.” Akira Ono had written that Akane had shut down the Upper students with her talents, protecting many of her classmates from their abuse. That exemplified the core of her backstory, an epitome of her life itself. “You want to know something cool, Daruma Man?” Akane turned around, showing a brimming smile. Hummer beheld a goddess in her. “No matter how many times they get stepped on... Weeds rise again, growing stronger than before!” Her *tonfa* glowed bright, changing form into a singular staff. With that staff in hand, Akane bee-lined towards the enormous skeleton.

Count Impaler saw that the next move would likely settle the duel. He swung both of his arms downward, slamming them into Akane. Her staff, with a dragon and serpent painted on it, clashed with the steel-beam-like fists. Large cracks ran through Count Impaler's arms, which healed immediately, but Akane would not stop.

FIRST SKILL: **Master of Staff**

Akane's staff spun around, smashing into the Count like a gust of wind. The gust soon became a tornado, and then a storm. The Count began groaning, overwhelmed by the sheer speed of the attacks. Then, an unbelievable impact struck the Count's legs.

SECOND SKILL: **Sweep**

With a wide swing of the staff, Akane unleashed a devastating skill. Back in the Game, this move had forced the enemy into the Tripped or Airborne state, similar to combo-enablers in fighting games. The levitation would only last for a moment, but it created a catastrophic opening for any opponent of Akane. Akane kicked the Count's back from there, launching him higher into the air. The giant monster leaving the ground caused a clamor around the Slave Market.

"This... Can't... Be..." The pain throughout his body, unsoothed by his rapid regeneration, combined with the shock of being shot up into the air, wiped out the Count's thoughts. Lifting such an enormous body into the sky would have been impossible even for the Count's king, Belphegor himself. Meanwhile, a shadow leapt up to meet his height. Before he knew it, catastrophe had risen to meet him, smiling at him dauntlessly.

"I told you. You were already dead the moment you met me."

"I-I am beyond death...!"

SECOND DASH: **Blinking Kick**

Akane unleashed kicks at blinding speed. 10, 20, 40, 70, 180... The countless blows released each second began chipping away at the count's body in pieces, his Regeneration completely unable to keep up. The destructive attack didn't pause even for a moment, the storm forcing the enormous count in a horizontal

direction, mid-air. Akane, as if unaffected by gravity, continued to kick the Count from the side, preparing to launch him through the sky like a shooting star.

“St— Stop... Stoa aaaagh hhhh!” For the first time in his existence, an image of death crossed the Count’s mind. He even summoned his original, which he had kept at the castle for his king’s protection until the last possible moment, but it was too late. The damage from the attack blew through the count’s Doubles at the speed of light, through his original that had just merged, and even his supernatural gift.

“Let’s go, the final blow! Southern Shaolin— Huh?” Akane watched the enormous collection of bones crumble into black particles and dissipate into the air. Death had come too quickly for the Count to register it, or even let out a dying scream. Akane landed light on her feet, but her face was shaded with discontent. “Dang it. I thought I’d get to pull the big guns for once...” Akane muttered, breaking Hummer’s cage with the chop of a hand, and flashed him a smile. She looked like a teenage athlete who had just finished warming up, and nothing like someone who had just been in deadly combat. “See? Piece of cake, Daruma Man.”

“S-Sure was... Th-That was, quite, um, something...”

Akane guffawed. “I can’t tell what you’re saying, Daruma Man.”

“I-I’m so sorry!” Hummer didn’t seem to know how to interact with the girl who had just taken out that mythical monster. He feared that one wrong move could get him killed.

“You know, Daruma Man? From now on— Woah!”

Just then, a mischievous gale blew through the Slave Market, revealing Akane’s undergarments for a brief moment, burning the image into Hummer’s eyes. He instinctively turned to the ground, shrinking himself in as small a ball as he could, as if he had just committed a cardinal sin. He felt no shred of excitement, only fear. Hummer, terrified, slowly looked up to find Akane glaring down at Hummer, her cheeks puffed out.

“You saw them, didn’t you?”

“N-No, I didn’t! I mean, yes, I did see them...!” Hummer, an honest man at the wrong time, answered truthfully and fully apologetically.

Akane let out a prolonged sigh, then somewhat proudly said, “Told you life’s not all bad.”

“Y-Yes! I-I mean, not that— what just happened— I mean...!” Hummer stammered through an attempted excuse.

Akane heartily laughed. She looked to the Slave Market to see Mynk running over, excitedly shouting something. “Not too shabby for my debut. Now to find that treasure... Hee hee hee.” With a mischievous grin, Akane visibly began scheming.

The long night had ended before they knew it, the sky beginning to gray above them. Freed from their cages, people cheered and cried tears of joy. Meanwhile, a commotion could be heard in the distance from Stage Two of the Slave Market.

“Ah, shucks. Hakuto’s on the move already.” Akane’s ears could tell that the commotion was not caused by combat, and that it would be too late for her to head over now.

“Hey! I finally thought things were over. What now!?”

“Little slow on the draw. Hakuto already made his move. Well, no sense in crying over it. Time to scope the next move and look for an opening for us to go solo again.”

“You expect me to hang around this dangerous place!? I’m going back!”

“Hey, baby, c’mon... Now that we made it through that battle, we’re BFFs for life.”

“What’s BFF supposed to mean!? Whatever, just take out those magic shoes. I’m going back to Rookie!”

A lightbulb seemed to appear above Akane’s head, and she produced her Moon Shoes. “I’ll lend you Partner Number Two, Emo. I want you to take them back to town. It’s not safe for them to stay here, and that limits me, too.”

“Wait, I can use these things?”

“Listen. You put them on, and think about the town you want to go to.”

“A-All right...”

“Come on, Daruma Man. Everyone else, too. We’re going to all hold hands and jump up to the stars!”

“J-Jump...”

“Huh? N-No, I don’t... Aghhh!” Just as Hummer was forcibly dragged out of his cage and put into the circle of survivors, the sights around them rapidly shifted. This particular jump not only overcame the physical distance they traveled, but leapt over everything these people understood about their world. While Mynk, after experiencing Quick Travel herself a few times, was rather excited to use the mysterious shoes for herself, Hummer was completely lost. “W-We’re... back in Rookie...? Am I dreaming...?” The sight of the familiar city painted by the morning sun soon became blurry. Compared to the Slave Market he’d just left, this city seemed overwhelmingly welcoming. It was difficult to believe that he could only remember bad memories before this time.

“There you go, Emo! Jump away, little bunny!”

“I see. I have been *chosen* by these shoes. *Fu fu fu...*” Mynk muttered, as she bounced on the springy shoes. Mynk hopping to and fro was rather adorable, albeit a little dumb. “I am Mynk, ruler of space and time! Mwahahahahaha!”

“That’s it, Edgy, looking great! Go get ’em, Chosen Cargo Locomotive!” A hand on the Holy Bandage (or whatever she called it) over her right eye, Mynk began cackling while Akane egged her on, thoroughly entertained.

Hummer, still confused by the change in location, watched the two girls cause a commotion for a while before timidly speaking up. “Ex-Excuse me... There’s a princess by the name of Cake in that Slave Market...”

“Cake? Sounds yummy,” said Akane.

“Sh-She’s a very kind princess... Please, if you can help her...”

“Princess, huh...? Aha. Maybe she’s why Hakuto gave me the green light... Maybe?” Akane pondered for a moment with a hand on her chin before quickly deciding that it wasn’t her job. “It’s too late now, sorry.”

“What!?”

“No chance that Hakuto would let such a marketable character slip through his fingers. I bet he’s whisking her away to safety right now, wearing some stupid smile on his face. Hakuto’s great at earning favors.”

“Marketable...?” While he didn’t really understand what Akane was talking about, Hummer couldn’t help but let out a sigh of relief. He couldn’t let her stay in that Slave Market any longer.

“Okie, c’mon now, let’s go back.”

“*Fu fu fu...* If Angelic Coat is my Second Form, this is my Third. If I must give it a name, I suppose it should be Leaping Darkness, my—”

“On the double, Black Cat Delivery!”

“H-Hey! You just made me forget the name I came up with!”

Hummer watched, dumbfounded, as the loud pair disappeared in an instant. He seemed to be doubting if he still had a grip on reality. He couldn’t help but pinch his cheeks, which produced unmistakable pain. That pain made him happier than he had ever been in his life. (That girl... There’s something about her that makes me think of the legendary Lady Moira...) Hummer thought of that strange notion. Fickle, temperate, and mischievous, Moira was said to toy with people’s destiny, manipulating them for better or worse. The more he thought about it, the resemblance Akane held to the mythical goddess was uncanny. Then, Hummer was reminded that he had no time to be lost in thought, as Mynk reappeared with more people from the Slave Market.

“Oh, you’re... Daruma, right?”

“It-It’s Hummer, actually...” Hummer muttered a correction, which never reached Mynk through her excitement.

“Mister Daruma. There’s a paladin staying in this city. Go fetch him, please.”

“Y-You want me to... The p-paladin!?”

“Yes, and hurry! We have to explain things to him. Ask for his help.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” Hummer ran as fast as he could with his portly stature. He couldn’t help but imagine that, if there was such a thing as destiny... his fate

definitely changed this day.

The Sky Above

The Demon Lord opened his eyes to find a log ceiling above him. It was still dark in the cottage, indicating that it was before dawn. (I fell asleep...) He couldn't remember at what time he had plopped onto the barrel of hay with his comfortable buzz. Looking down, he realized that he was also covered with hay in lieu of a blanket. The Demon Lord rolled around, enjoying the rare experience of sleeping in natural hay. (This sort of thing is nice, once in a while... I remember camping on that uninhabited island when I was a kid. There was even a playground ship off-shore.) A nostalgic memory revisited the Demon Lord in his sleepy mind. The deck on the large mock-ship had countless ropes dangling from the mast, which children could use to swing out into the ocean. He remembered how all the children gave a Tarzan cry as they swung out and dove into the water. (It was fun at the time, but that was a pretty scary playground in hindsight...) The higher they swung, the deeper they sank into the water.

As the Demon Lord was remembering those things, he felt something stir beside him. (What is that...?) He lifted the hay covering him to find Olgan, curled up like a cat. Her short stature made her look even more like a small animal. "You fell asleep too...?"

His remark must have woken her, as she opened her eyes to meet his. After staring blankly for a few moments, she almost closed her eyes again before jumping out of the hay. "H-How long have you been awake...!?"

"Hm? I just woke up."

"J-Just so you know, you were the one who just came and fell asleep next to me!"

"I see. I must have been a little buzzed."

"Hmph. How reckless... You really don't have any sense of danger, do you?"

Meanwhile, Olgan herself looked like a sleepy hamster, all covered in straw. The Demon Lord would have countered 'you were just going to go back to sleep' on another day, but decided to just get up and sit at a chair.

“We did get the general location...” he muttered. The drunken cat had excitedly told them where the Slave Market was located. The problem was that she had given them three different locations. “The mountain that even Anima won’t cross, up north, and the divine realm down south... Akane must have gone through here.” He pointed to a drawing of a shinto shrine that he must have drunkenly doodled. Despite his intoxication, both the drawing and his memo beside it were meticulous.

(He’s as perfect as always...) The Demon Lord remembered what kind of character Hakuto Kunai was. He boasted overwhelming physical strength and a brain born to scheme, and was a master at many things from table etiquette and various dances both Western and Eastern, to even cultural customs. He switched between a mask of good and a mask of evil, recruiting anyone useful to his cause with every tactic in the book. Both his raw charisma and his ability to manipulate a person was simply frightening, worthy of his status as the final boss of the game. The Demon Lord couldn’t help but wonder, placing a hand on his chest, (What does he want...?). He thought of the will of the real Kunai that he had felt in the Bastille Dungeon. Such a powerful being wanted for something, longed for something, and was still scheming to get it... The Demon Lord shuddered to imagine what would happen to this world if his desires came to fruition.

Before he knew it, Olgan had sat down beside him, looking down at the map. “So this is what it looks like now,” Olgan muttered with mixed feelings upon seeing her father’s territory for the first time in a while. She burned with longing for her lost mother, with hatred for her father, and with the memories of torturous days, as well as the love she never received.

“So, which facility did Akane go to?”

“Stage One, right here,” the Demon Lord proclaimed without any hesitation or doubt, despite having three possibilities in front of them.

“But Stage Two is closer to the border.”

“Apparently, Stage One is where people are treated the worst. She went there.” The Demon Lord knew that Akane would go straight to whichever place needed the most urgent attention. In fact, he was already cooking up

something else in his mind. “It’s not a bad move if we say that she’s a distraction, just like we originally planned.” He took a glass and a few bottles of Fire Spirit from around the cottage and placed them on the table. The dwarf was snoring away, and the cat slept, curled up on another barrel of hay.

“Drinking this early? Without even asking?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll leave the absinthe in return.”

The previous night, the Dwarf had practically sucked every drop of the absinthe out of the bottle until he finally collapsed on the floor, inebriated. Of course, any kind of alcohol from the game, like Absinthe, had Stamina-healing effects. With the very important anti-cold bonus, Absinthe in particular was a valuable commodity in certain arenas. However, taking a drink of an alcoholic item increased an internal value. Once that value was over the set threshold, the player could no longer control their character properly, which often cost them the Game. This sort of useless attention to detail was the reason why Akira Ono was praised as a genius by some and hated by others.

The Demon Lord clinked a leftover ice cube from the pack into the glass before pouring some Fire Spirit into it. He tossed it back and shook his head after he swallowed the drink. “This old man makes a killer drink. If I were to put it in the game, I’d guess it would heal 25 to 40 stamina or so. With a huge buff for maintaining body temperature.” The Demon Lord rambled on some nonsense, visibly amused.

Olgan watched him without asking any questions about it, apparently acclimated to his behavior. “Hmph. Glad you’re having fun, but what do you mean ‘not a bad move?’” Olgan asked, resting her chin on her palm. She didn’t seem irritated, more like a daughter watching her father who was strangely upbeat so early in the morning.

“Using the monkey to make an even bigger mess.”

“The Animadmiral? How would you—” Olgan cut herself short. She realized that the Demon Lord had already planted two seeds already. He had robbed the ape-hybrids of their treasure, Jingu Bang, and had even ‘cursed’ their leader, for all they knew. That was some demonic scheming. “I see,” Olgan remarked. “The battle seemed nothing but fruitless at the time, but here we are.”

“They seem excitable. Let them go nuts for a while until they settle down,” the Demon Lord said, as if he was talking about a few cooped-up dogs that needed a good run in the park. He had no thoughts whatsoever about the repercussions of a band of Anima crossing over and making a mess in Hellion territory, which made his behavior even more troublesome.

“It isn’t a bad idea to use the ape-hybrids. So, where do we come in?”

“In the meantime, we’ll go visit your father. Through the front door.” The Demon Lord took the bottles of Fire Spirit and Thunder Water beside them and tossed them into his Item Folder, casually leaving five bottles of absinthe behind.

“My father...? Just the two of us?” Olgan questioned. The Demon Lord didn’t answer, but simply grabbed Olgan and picked her up. Then, he sent a Communication to set up a *meeting* with Monkey Magic. “I-I told you not to grab me without asking!”

“Don’t worry about it. No big deal.”

“That’s not for you to decide!” As Olgan shouted, the Demon Lord Quick Traveled to where the shrine was located. Their surroundings flickered to a deep forest. While this should have been a mystical experience, no matter how many times she had done it before, Olgan continued shouting with audible anger: “Why!? Are you so reckless!? And insensitive!? Taking those bottles of Fire Spirit without asking! And drinking first thing in the morning! *And* that stupid grin on your face last night when that *cat* hung herself around you!” Olgan’s rage was particularly audible for the last accusation.

Finally, the Demon Lord interjected. “What do you think I am, some pervy, drunk bum!?”

“That’s exactly what you are!”

Having heard their screaming match, the leader of the apes cautiously appeared before them, accompanied by a kappa. “All this commotion in the divine realm... As crass as always, human.”

“I-I don’t think we should piss him off...” Monkey Magic remarked.

Seeing the two approach, Olgan hurriedly wriggled out of the Demon Lord’s

grasp and turned the opposite direction. Both her and the leader of the apes seemed completely disgruntled.

The only one smiling at this encounter was the Demon Lord. "I apologize for the rushed request. I actually have a favor to ask you."

"How dare a mere human ask an ape-hybrid, the Wisdom of the Fores— Ow ow ow ow!" At the Demon Lord's command, the *kinkoji* on the ape's head tightened, causing him to roll on the ground in agony. Even the incredibly powerful Animadmiral was powerless now.

"I am humbled by your undying dedication to testing the durability of your skull... but won't you hear me out this time?"

"F-Fine! Just stop this thing! Please, stop it!"

"Glad we've reached an understanding." With a brimming smile, the Demon Lord reached his hand out.

The ape stood up on his own, a thoroughly disgusted look on his face. He wouldn't be caught dead shaking the hand of a human. "Spit out what you want. I'm busy learning how to dance around a black monolith."

"I don't know what that means, but there's only one thing I want from you. To attack the Slave Markets within the territory of a devil named Belphegor. Here, and here." He pointed to the map.

The leader of the ape fell silent. The request had seemed to be beyond his brain's processing power. The ape stood still for a moment before beginning to monkey around.

"M-Mister Shadow... Not that I got much room to speak, but keep the leader out of something complicated like that!"

"Complicated...?" The Demon Lord crooked his neck.

The kappa looked at Olgan incredulously. By all means, it seemed like a trap. "That girl there's the daughter of Belphegor, ain't she? What's the big idea?"

Olgan twisted her face in bitterness. If the Demon Lord hadn't been there, she would have burned the little hair left on the kappa's head with a Fire spell.

"Just another family feud. Don't overthink it. I just need you to go wild."

“As if it was that easy... Besides, going past the divine realm’s forbidden.” After laying the dizzied ape leader down onto the ground, the kappa carefully cleaned the dish on his head. The Demon Lord curiously watched their strange mannerisms for a while, before the leader jumped up from the ground like a breaker had just been flipped on.

“The great mother meant you!” the ape shouted.

“Mother...?” Now, the Demon Lord’s eyes widened.

The ape was uncharacteristically quiet as he rambled on, shaking. “Why would the Great Mother...!? A mere human like you...!” His face was red with visceral anger and overwhelming jealousy. The great dragon whom they revered and worshiped as a living god, the dragon who remained completely silent for millennia at a time, had told them to leave this human be. The blunt utterance spread like crackling bolts of lightning throughout Animania, unsettling the entire nation with various interpretations. Even to the infamously reckless Monkey Magic, those words weighed incredibly heavy. After the ape had burst out shouting and now became silent, the kappa whispered something to him. It was evident that some serious revelation had struck him.

“I don’t know what mother you’re talking about... But if you do this for me, I’ll return that stick.” The Demon Lord finally compromised. The Jingu Bang was a broken weapon by this world’s standards, but 5 piercing damage was practically a mosquito bite to the Demon Lord... If the attacks connected, that was.

“My treasure is important. But Mother said to...” The ape sulked.

Then, the kappa had a light bulb moment, and whispered something else to him. While the Demon Lord was confused by the erratic line of conversation, Olgan was carefully observing the pair of Anima before them. “Why don’t we think outside the box?” the kappa asked. “There’s some merit to the idea.”

“What do you mean?” asked the ape.

“Mother did tell us to let him be, but not to *not* help, did she?”

“No...?” The ape seemed confused all over again by it.

The kappa’s point was nothing short of its face value, but it wore a fish-eating grin, apparently thrilled by his own cleverness. “Mother spoke of this, which

means it's a *real* big deal. Quietly watching won't earn you any medals."

"B-But..."

"Even as we speak, that *dog* might sniff out a huge opportunity for major cred. Then he'll never let us live it down."

The ape looked up from the ground at astonishing speed, his body quaking with anger and his face beet-red. "Are you kidding me!? That mongrel doesn't deserve mother's...!" His sentence trailed off as the ape failed to find words to match his anger.

Then came the finishing blow: the beautiful voice of a young woman from the sky.

Ape, the Wisdom of the Forest. I ask you to help this human.

"Grand Priestess!" the two Anima shouted in unison, jumping in shock before freaking out and bowing.

While Olgan cautiously put her hand on Mr. Carry-All, the Demon Lord began enjoying a cigarette in a leisurely fashion.

You could say I owe that human. I'll speak to Tatsu myself.

Completely revitalized by the voice, Monkey Magic pounded his chest.

The kappa excitedly ran his hand on his dish. "If the Grand Priestess says so, we've got nothing to worry about... Now this is the shot we've been waiting for!"

"Ooh ooh ah! Finally, I can crack some filthy Hellion skulls! Can't wait to see the look on that mongrel's muzzle!"

"Gheh heh heh heh heh! Gheah!" They burst out laughing, colliding their fists until they finally began holding each other's arms and dancing in circles.

The Demon Lord watched the two as he exhaled smoke in exasperation. Then, the ape outstretched his hand with a changed look on his face. "Give me the staff back. It ticks me off to listen to a human, but when the Grand Priestess said so... I'm in."

The Demon Lord was secretly astounded by how different the ape seemed.

His jolly excitement had vanished, replaced by the look of a warrior. “I see. I’m glad you’ve come around...” the Demon Lord answered, puffing out smoke. He produced Jingu Bang from his Item Folder and placed it in the ape’s hand.

The ape gripped the staff and ran his hand across it a few times before deciding that there was nothing amiss with his treasure, and snapped into action. “Show me the map, human. Where are the spots?”

“I want you to strike these two spots. Go as wild as you want. Except don’t kill any humans. Take them to the city of Rookie once it’s over.”

There was a beat before the ape answered. “Got it.” He seemed unsatisfied that he had to go through so much trouble for mere humans. Even so, the man before the ape was completely outside the scope of the humans he knew.

“The chick from the shrine. I’m done talking to you. Once this is over, we’re having a discussion *at length* . Don’t think you can get away without facing me again.” Much to the shock of the Anima, the Demon Lord brazenly threatened the being they called the Grand Priestess. The ape, in particular, couldn’t help but be impressed at how fearless the Demon Lord was.

You’re a scary man, as always... Right down to your face.

“I told you not to judge people by their face!”

My children are quite fond of you, too. They call you Evil-Face.

“I think they straight-up hate me...”

Their back-and-forth was light-hearted, as if they were old friends. After what the Great Mother had said, the ape was beginning to change his opinion of the Demon Lord. (He’s no ordinary human... He’s something else.) This was how the ape made sense of the being before him, that the Demon Lord must have been a creature on another level. Someone from the myths who was close to the Great Mother and the Grand Priestess, who protected Animania in the days of old. Once he decided that it was so, the ape didn’t have to think about anything anymore. He gave one last bow to the sky before turning to rush off, when the Demon Lord called to him.

“Take this with you. It’s the star of the show, in a way.”

“Huh...? What’s this?”

The Demon Lord had handed him a large, wooden box that was extremely heavy. “Don’t worry about it now, I’ll tell you later. Be careful with it,” he said.

“Hmph...” The leader of the apes began walking away. With every step, more ape-hybrids gathered around him out of nowhere, surrounding their leader: 10, 20, 50...

By the time the apes made it through the forest to the border, their numbers were close to 500.

With a sick grin, the kappa called to the leader of the apes. “Which one first?”

“Stage Two, then Stage Three after some time.” The leader of the apes knew where the Slave Markets were. In fact, he was quite familiar with the geography of the Hellion territory. They had been fighting their next-door neighbor for thousands of years, after all. He almost didn’t need a map to get around.

“Geh heh heh! All your colleagues’ll have their minds blown!” The kappa smirked, thinking of the other ten Animadmirals. They too, like human nobles and Grand Devils, competed with other Animadmirals over their pride. Just as any group of leaders had been throughout history. In fact, the contest for superiority was much more concentrated and severe in the world of beasts.

“Send any captured humans to Master Tatsu.”

“That’s fine, but... Is that it?”

“What do you mean?” the ape asked the kappa. The human had requested them to attack the Slave Market and safely get the humans out.

“There’s no sense in missing this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity...”

“Once-in-a...? Too long. Make it simple.”

“Go for the throat, is what I’m saying.” The kappa’s eyes shone eerily.

After some time, the ape began laughing, having figured out what the ‘throat’ was. The ape thought of Belphegor, who wrought devastation on the border. Their parameters had once been broken and they’d suffered major damage in their southern forest. Even then, Belphegor had retreated once it seemed like there was nothing left of interest for him. This was an episode that many Anima

remembered with disgust.

“Trying to egg me on? Try again.”

“That Belphegor’s got to be up for the next King of Devils. Take him, and your achievements are sure to reach the ears of the Great Mother...”

“Stop being so transparent... Because it’s working.”

“Geh heh heh! Now, we’re talking! You’re the most injudicious ape there is! The most headlong man in the woods! Mister Monkey Mind himself!”

“Enough compliments. I’m blushing.” It was dubious how large of a vocabulary the leader of the apes had.

The Anima left, leaving tranquility to return to the forest. Olgan let out a sigh at the ridiculous storm that had just passed, and the Demon Lord puffed in amusement. “Now, let’s see what kind of a show they’ll put on,” he said.

“As if it’s a source of entertainment... We’re not going there for your amusement,” Olgan said, subtly gripping the end of the Demon Lord’s coat. She must have decided to initiate physical contact if she was going to be forced into it anyway.

“I hate to break it to you, but I can’t Quick Travel to a place I haven’t been.”

“Huh...?”

“We have to run after them.”

“Wha—!? Th-Then say that, already!” Olgan shouted, throwing the end of his coat aside, completely blushing.

The Demon Lord suppressed his urge to ask how he was supposed to read Olgan’s mind. “No matter. Let’s see what Hellion territory is like. Come.”

“Hmph...” Olgan floated into the air, creating distance between her and the Demon Lord, before flying straight towards Hellion territory. The Demon Lord followed, light on his feet.

After the raucous band had left, a solemn shrine appeared in the middle of the forest.

“What an uproarious crowd...” A young fox-hybrid sat at the exterior hallway

of a building, throwing back a sake cup. She let out a happy sigh, apparently enjoying the drink within it. Despite her being dressed like a *shinto* priest, her kimono was wide open at the chest, exuding a sensual allure. Beside her, the little red fox and blue fox slept soundly. All in all, it was a peaceful scene. In contrast, a shadow that stood at the center of the shrine grounds was emanating a powerful presence. Removing their helmet, a head of mystically purple hair shook out, and the figure turned towards the direction where the Demon Lord headed out.

“Are you happy with this, Tatsu?”

“I have no opinion... I only obey the will of Mother.”

“She said to leave him alone, didn’t she? Don’t you think I disobeyed her will by encouraging that ape-hybrid?”

Tatsu didn’t answer, and only stared into the direction of the Demon Lord. She was endlessly beautiful, engulfed in an aura of utmost magnificence.

“That look in your eyes...” the fox added. “This may be the first time I’ve seen you with any sign of emotion.”

“Great blessings and great hatred...”

“Hrm?”

“That one doesn’t belong in this world.”

“Hm... You’re going to kill it?”

“I can do that any time. I only wish to know Mother’s intentions.” With that, the woman called Tatsu vanished.

The shrine keeper let out a sigh. “You have quite a difficult daughter... I suppose we grow to love the troublemakers the most.” She gazed up at the sky, stroking the hair of the little foxes. The morning sun lit up a few clouds in the sky, while the end of the sky opposite the rising sun was still dark. “It may rain tonight...” Her innocuous whisper seemed to foreshadow an event in the very near future.

Monkey Magic

Race: Ape-Hybrid — Age: ? — Sex: Male

Level: ? — Stats: Unknown

Weapon: **Jingu Bang**

A staff that can stretch and shrink to any length, buffed with a bonus of 5 damage to the enemy, no matter what.

Skill: **Monkey Brain**

Proudly boasts one or more of Xiaoshou's ideas.

Skill: **Monkey See, Monkey Do**

The silly name aside, this is a broken skill that allows Monkey Magic to fire a second Chain Attack in a row.

Skill: **Chimp Call**

Allows Monkey Magic to shout directions to his hench-apes faraway.

Skill: **Double Down**

Raise the damage of a single attack in exchange for the user's HP.

The leader of the ape-hybrids, and one of the famous Animania. While the Demon Lord easily defeated him, no ordinary human would stand a chance against Monkey Magic. His ability to call more apes to his aid with Chimp Call makes him formidable in group combat, too. He is boisterous, often using his Monkey Brain to showboat Xiaoshou's knowledge.

Xiaoshou Baldibald

Race: Kappa — Age: ? — Sex: Male

Level: ? — Stats: Unknown

Race Skill: **Kappa-pa**

His stats increase in any body of water, which makes it easier to hunt for marine life, too.

Ages ago, he fought the ape-hybrids over claiming a river as his territory. Xiaoshou lost to Monkey Magic, and has served as his advisor ever since. While much of his advice is janky, it's always a hit with the apes. No one knows what lies under the dish on his head. In fact, no one cares.

The Long but Short Festival

——Belphegor's castle.

The throne room, decorated in red and gold, was filled with a lascivious air, as it always was. Succubi that fed on male seed, half-serpent Lamia, lesser devil Hunietraps, and Dark Elves wrapped themselves around Belphegor on his throne, despite the early hour of the day. Even a rare Red Slime, shaped like a female human, was wrapped around Belphegor's leg. The sight epitomized lust and sloth.

A Messenger rushed into the lecherous room. "Master Belphegor! Ape-hybrids have infiltrated the territory!"

"He plans to entertain himself without me..." The king's vague remark caused everyone in the room to give each other a look.

The fearless Hunietrap alone sweetly asked: "What do you mean, King?"

"Count Impaler. He always bugs me about working, and he's going to have the most fun when it matters."

A short time ago, the Count's 'original' had disappeared from where it stood before the throne. He had kept himself divided into five Doubles, utilizing his overwhelming vitality. The king had been wondering what prompted the Count to reach for his original. The others who noticed the skeleton's disappearance from the room sprung up to voice their grievances:

"If the Count's so serious about it, no one else will get to play."

"Aww, I wanted to play with the monkeys!"

"It's not every day that the Count becomes so excited about something."

"Bingo!"

The king sighed, for they didn't understand what he did. "He would never move his original to deal with mere apes..."

"What do you mean?"

"He is seizing the opportunity to invade the nation of Anima without me..." The king cursed the Count. He knew full well what the Count's true intentions

were. This was encouragement for Belphegor to leave his castle. Considering that the Count moved his original, this temptation was practically blackmail, promising the king wonderful fun outside of his castle. He was being taunted, Belphegor thought, to get off of his chair before all the fun was gone. “He’s much too stoic... He still fails to understand the sweetness of days spent in idleness.”

“What? Invading Animania is huge!”

“I’m sure the Count is well aware of that. He’ll play nice.”

“Bingo bingo...”

“I hope he brings back some apes... I’ll play with them in their dreams...”

The king chuckled at the happy-go-lucky comments in the room. However, even he couldn’t believe what came out of the Messenger’s mouth next.

“A-And...! *Her Highness* has been spotted among the attackers...” it added, eyes to the ground and his body shaking.

The king appeared astonished for a moment before slapping his knee and bursting out laughing. “What’s this!? My dear daughter is *attacking* me!? With apes, no less! Fah ha ha!” His golden armor shook and clamored, and the women in the room slowly retreated from the king, their faces twisting in fear. They couldn’t tell how he would react. Belphegor leapt to his feet and shouted as he outstretched his arms. “Our long-awaited reunion! I never expected my dear daughter to come to *me* ! She must be terribly homesick! Not even I foresaw her bringing Anima!” he shouted madly, gazing up at the ceiling. Then, he wandered about the throne room with a hand on his forehead, delving into some sort of scheme. The Messenger and the women were all silent, unsure of what to do or say. There was no reasoning with Belphegor in this state. If anyone dared to speak to him, they could very well be killed. “What am I doing...?” the king muttered. “I must prepare to welcome my dear daughter! Tell the Count to keep his playtime short. This is important. You must speak to him like you’re scolding a child.” He spoke to the Messenger like a troublemaker, grinning within his helmet.

“Y-Yes, my liege!”

It seems the king wanted to get the Count back for always nagging at him. However, he was no longer alive. More importantly, Olgan had brought none other than the astoundingly fearless Demon Lord of the Empire, rather than any Anima.

(Dammit! ‘Scolding a child’ my ass!) Sprinting through the castle, the Messenger felt like he was going to puke at the impossible request. He shuddered to imagine what would happen to a mere monster who spoke to the prideful Count in that way. It was easy to envision. The Count would heartily laugh at the king’s message, at first. Then, he would impale the Messenger like a piece of meat on a skewer. (Not happening! I have to make it work...!) As much as he hated the request, he couldn’t disobey the king.

The Messenger stood before one of the eerie mirrors set up in the castle for low-rank soldiers. While the mirror was beautifully made, it was engulfed in a suspicious-looking rust-colored slime. One could use this mirror to instantly travel to any of the Slave Market Stages, at the expense of a good amount of Stamina. This was a relic of the days of old, and no one knew if the mirror itself or the slime that surrounded it sucked out the user’s Stamina. There were even half-credible rumors that some had walked into the mirror never to be seen again, making this an object particularly unliked among low-rank soldiers.

(I guess there’s no other way... Shit...!) The Messenger hardened his resolve and dove into the mirror. Much of his strength immediately left his body as the world around him shifted. He was in the familiar Stage One of the Slave Market, but the place was terribly quiet. (Bizarre... I heard that the Count was toying with an intruder in Stage One...) Of course, it was only natural that the place was quiet when there were no slaves nor Hellions left. (Did they already get through the border...?) The Messenger considered the thought, but saw a pillar of flames coming up from Stage Two in the distance. It was difficult to believe that those who infiltrated the territory had been eliminated. (The Count must have gone to Stage Two. Those filthy apes sure know how to cause... Hm?) The Messenger reflexively lifted his hand at the sound of something flying through the air. Then, his right wrist was met with overwhelming pain, before his hand fell to the ground with a trail of white smoke.

“Graaahhh!”

“Fu fu fu,... You can’t deceive the Black Phoenix sealed within my right eye. I knew you would come, since ten millennia ago,” Mynk haughtily declared, hopping up and down on the Moon Shoes. Without context, she looked utterly insane.

“A human like you— Gragh!!” As soon as he approached, the bright Holy element emanating from Mynk made him feel like he had been tossed into the freezing cold. He finally realized that the woman he was facing was no ordinary human. (Sh-She’s... wearing armor made of the Holy element!) Its mere existence seemed to prick his skin and fry his brain. Wisely, the Messenger immediately turned to flee. This time, however, luck was not on his side. Mynk leapt high into the air, chopping the Messenger in half with her staff before he could even cry out in pain.

“Fight evil with evil, darkness with darkness... You shouldn’t have peeked into the abyss.” Mynk muttered some more nonsense with a hand over her right eye, even though no one was around. It almost seemed like a punishment for Mynk to stand alone in the middle of the windy wasteland. After taking the former slaves to Rookie, she had decided to wait here for a messenger from Belphegor’s castle, and she was spot-on. “This will keep info hidden for a while longer...” Mynk muttered, and leapt into the air, thinking of Rookie.

Now, the fact that Count Impaler was already gone would remain undiscovered as the events ensued. It wasn’t hard to imagine the confusion and chaos this lack of information would bring to Belphegor’s forces. However, there would be confusion for all factions, soon enough.

The ape-hybrids collectively crossed the border. Crossing that line was strictly forbidden under any other circumstance, akin to walking into a gunpowder room with a lit torch. Monkey Magic, boss of the apes, stepped right over the border line, Jingu Bang in hand, and even sped up. “Don’t you dare stop!” he called out.

“Aye-Aye!” the apes called back, inspired by their leader’s bravery. Monkey Magic was closer to reckless than brave, but that might have been the exact characteristic required to lead a rough-around-the-edges crowd like his.

“Finally, the day has come!”

“Yeah! Go! Go! Go! It’s time to make them pay!”

“Today’s the day to avenge our clan!”

“Kill every bastard serving Belphegor!”

“I’ll avenge you, Grandma!”

The apes were burning with powerful vengeance. The war between Animania and Hellion territory had been raging for thousands of years, and the wedge between them ran deep. In particular, the ape-hybrids were one of the species of Anima who had the most reason to hate the Hellions. They had set up a peace treaty with Belphegor and their leader, two generations prior to Monkey Magic. The treaty was violated by Belphegor, who ambushed the apes, killing most of them. It was only natural for the apes to be excited for this attack in return. In the middle of the charging band, the *kappa* alone seemed concerned.

“What’s wrong, Baldibald? Getting scared?”

“How many times must I tell you, my name’s Xiaoshou! But I was just thinking about who that Mister Shadow is...”

“A god from the days of fairy tales, just like the Grand Priestess.”

“G-God? Wait, you’re serious?”

The leader of the apes didn’t answer him. It wasn’t that he had proof or even a good reason to draw that conclusion. He had just tossed the Demon Lord into that category because he didn’t want to keep thinking about it. “A false or dark god at that.” The ape couldn’t help but straighten his expression. The man had stolen his treasure as a prank, cursed those who opposed him, and even threatened another god. What else could he be but an evil god?

“H-He did seem real chummy with the Grand Priestess... But really? Does that mean we were talked into this by a false god?”

“False or not, god or not, he gave us a reason to crack their skulls. I won’t thank him for it, but I’ll use it,” the leader of the apes declared, without too deep of a thought process. He was fully willing to ride this wave, as long as he got to take on the Hellions. At the end of the day, they were simply taking advantage of the Demon Lord, too.

“They see us!”

The leader of the apes looked forward at the call, and noticed a horde of monsters swarming before them. Monkey Magic leapt with a piercing shout, ready to finally pay back the grudge owed over generations. He took Jingu Bang in hand and shattered the head of a stone golem.

——Slave Market, Stage Two.

Climbing out of the carriage, Cake admired a sight she hadn’t seen in a long time. Compared to Stage One, she was now in a separate world, and stood before what appeared to be a great noble’s manor. (I was supposed to be here...) Cake thought, sadness and anger swelling within her. Cake had once survived life in Stage One, and had been brought up to Stage Two. Here, she received extravagant meals, clean sheets, a comfortable bed, free time, and even rewards when she performed well. She loathed the brainwashing-slash-training she received, but Stage Two was heavenly in every aspect other than that, compared to Stage One. As a former princess, she had performed exceedingly well in etiquette and speech classes, those skills drawing envious gazes from her fellow slaves.

However, her time in Stage Two didn’t last long. One day, there was suddenly a shift in power, and the despicable devil Kale had taken the helm. The rest of the story doesn’t warrant going into. Any answer Cake gave was declared wrong, she was forced to stay in classes longer every day, and she suffered physical and verbal abuse in public on a daily basis. Seeing how she was treated by Kale, the rest of the slaves began brazenly bullying Cake, too. (He set it all up...) Her fall from princess to slave alone was the height of tragedy. Then, Kale had schemed to make Cake experience the *fall* once more, after showing her a short-lived sweet dream. This required a lot of time and effort to set up, but Kale wasn’t one to skimp on work when it came to this sort of maliciousness. (That fucker... If I only had enough power...!) The humiliation of being sent back to Stage One as a ‘failure’ resurfaced.

Then, a supremely annoying voice was heard. “Ah, Lord Knight. If you had called, I would have sent someone to bring you...”

“A sudden order from the Count. I’ll stay here a while.”

“From the Count! Of course, please stay as long as you like.” The devil in a tailcoat gave an elegant bow to the Hellknight.

Cake would never forget that blue face, the pair of horns on his head, and those cautious, snake-like eyes. The devil was called Hansel, the one who Kale had brought to take over Stage Two. Much to Cake’s frustration, just looking at the devil or hearing his voice made her shrink into herself. She had been abused by him for far too long.

“Lord Knight, who might your companion be...?”

“Kale has given her some order. Accommodate her.”

“...Understood.”

With that, the Hellknight left without giving the extravagance around him a second look. He seemed to be loyal to Count Impaler.

“It’s been a while, Cake... You useless girl...” Hansel’s remark made Cake’s shoulders jolt. With plenty of malice, Hansel played with his well-kempt mustache as he looked down at Cake like she was a piece of garbage. “What do you want? A defective toy like you doesn’t belong here.” Hansel’s tone had completely changed. It was almost hard to believe that he was the same devil who spoke so subserviently to the Hellknight.

“M-Master K-Kale told me—”

“I didn’t hear shit from him. What are you scheming, now?” Hansel spat out, then put an expensive-looking cigar in his mouth. A moment later, a fist collided with Cake’s face, and she let out a pained groan as she fell to the ground. “How useless are you!? You have *two seconds* to light my cigar when I bite it! Does *anything* stay in your useless brain!?” Stepping on Cake’s stomach, Hansel spat on her. This was just a glimpse of what Cake had endured in Stage Two.

“I-I’m sorry, Master... I haven’t been given a Fire Spell Stone...!”

“Huh...? Oh, yeah.” Hansel chuckled like nothing of significance had happened, and lifted his foot off of her. Those in Stage Two each carried a Fire Spell Stone, but there was no reason for a slave in Stage One to be given such a thing. “And what about Master Kale?” Hansel puffed out a cloud of smoke, self-importantly.

Shaking, Cake managed to squeeze out another sentence. If she didn't speak up now, there would have been no point in coming at all. "The slaves in Stage One... are malnourished..."

"Huh? So?"

"He instructed me to ask for some more food..."

Hansel scoffed a puff of smoke out of his nose and laughed. He was sure that Kale would never order anything as generous as that. Hansel knew how evil he himself was, but Kale was on another level. Kale was practically a monster.

"Quit talking out of your ass, you piece of garbage. You expect me to believe Master *Kale* said that?"

His icy glare nearly broke Cake's resolve, but she knew this was sink or swim. She lifted her head, and spoke with deliberate matter-of-factness. "Please, remember what the knight said..."

"Huh?" Hansel nearly slugged Cake for her insubordinate tone, but held back. He couldn't ignore the mention of the Hellknight, who was well-trusted by the Count.

"He said to 'accommodate' me..."

"That's where it's all out of whack! Where's the *proof* that you're here on Master Kale's orders, huh!?"

Hansel persisted, despite the Hellknight's influence. The last thing he was willing to do was be ordered around by a 'piece of garbage,' let alone give away food.

"I unfortunately have no proof to present... I will obey your decision, Master Hansel." Cake bowed deep in a show of humility.

Now that the decision was left to him, Hansel was suddenly met with a conundrum. (Trash. There's no way that Master Kale would ever... No, wait! What if he *did*!?) Doubt sprouted in Hansel's mind. Perhaps Kale was in the process of toying with the girl, for whatever reason. (And if I get in the way of that...) He shuddered to imagine what would happen to him. His eyes might be gouged out, or he might lose a limb or two. Either way, he was sure to beg for

death. (But if Master Kale *hadn't* given such an order...) In turn, he might be tortured for being played for a fool by one of his 'toys.' Finally, Hansel realized that his fate rested upon one decision: to give Cake the food or refuse.

Cake watched the devil, whom she would still hate after killing him a thousand times over, lose what little color was present in his already pale face and panic. (That's what you get, you shithead! Keep turning those gears!) Cake faced the ground in order to hide her expression. From afar, she looked perfectly obedient.



Hansel had lost his cool, as he began twirling his mustache, stroking his beard, and even putting the wrong end of the cigar in his mouth. “Y-You’re *sure* it was Master Kale’s order...?” Hansel finally implored, like a groveling dog.

Cake kept her head low, cursing up a storm in her mind, and sticking out her tongue in lieu of her middle finger. She seemed much more devilish than Hansel at the moment. In the midst of her small victory, Cake didn’t forget to gently push Hansel towards the exit of the rat maze. “I do know... that Count Impaler has sent the knight to this place.”

“Wh-What’s that supposed to mean?”

(You can’t even figure *that* out, you blue moron? You really are shit-for-brains. Why don’t you suck on that pathetic *thing* between your legs and think for once in your miserable existence!?) Despite her vulgar internal monologue, Cake remained calm on the exterior. “If I may... Was not the knight speaking on behalf of the Count?”

“R-Right... The Count sent the knight here. It wouldn’t be amiss to think that the knight would relay a message on the Count’s behalf... *Of course*, I should make accommodations...” Some color returned to Hansel’s face, now that he had a bare-minimum excuse to tell Kale if he had not given the order. Of course, he would have to wait and see if such an excuse would pass. “Indeed. If the Count wishes so... I’ll have them prepare the food.”

“Thank you, Master!” Cake bowed even lower, quietly amused that Hansel had now described it to be the Count’s wishes. It was a funny thought to her that a horrifying devil would choose to cover his own ass in the end. In her dry, fruitless days, that was a revelation she could always take with her.

“A lot of noise over there... Is there some sort of event at Stage One?”

“Nothing that I know of... The Count was inspecting the market...”

“Hrm. I better expect him here, too...” Hansel’s tone had returned to normal, and he straightened his collar and back.

As it turned out, Hansel and the entirety of Stage Two were about to get roped into the same commotion. “Master Hansel!” someone called. “Ape-hybrids have infiltrated the territory!”

“Those monkeys? They don’t have the guts. Our king has thoroughly trampled their entire miserable race.” Hansel hideously scoffed, but his expression changed as he heard the cacophonous cries of apes approaching from the distance. He realized that it was an incredibly large horde of them. Angered apes were infamously vicious, and this was commonly known even in Hellion territory. Without realizing, Hansel gulped in pure fear.

Cake began to hear the spine-rattling cries, too. She felt her mind go blank imagining the wrath of the ape-hybrids, which no human could possibly stand up to. (What the hell...!? What’s happening...!?)

The end of their days here approached...

Almost all of the ape-hybrids on the continent were present in this invasion, and so densely packed together that they completely blocked the morning sun from touching the ground anywhere among the horde. Each time the leader used Chimp Call, the mass of apes intricately shifted, coordinating into numerous teams. Three thousand ape-hybrids had been called to action, in all. They had immediately broken off into teams of fifty, rushing towards Stage Two in perfect formation.

“Avenge our mothers and fathers! Tear their heads off and feast on their brains!”

The apes answered their leader’s call, attacking the monsters before them with their faces bright-red. They had trained long and hard since their bitter defeat long ago. Their strategy was simple at first glance: outnumber the opponent. What made it so effective was the apes’ incredible coordination and speed. The teams of fifty broke off in groups of ten, then regrouped again. The different teams organically moved together, with the ability to even form a huge battalion at a moment’s notice. Any monsters lingering around the border were immediately taken out, paving a straight path to Stage Two.

“Attack the manor! Who among you will be an *alpha* to lead the charge!?”

The ape-hybrids screamed in excitement. Even in the Anima world, things like leading a charge or making an important kill were considered great accomplishments on the battlefield.

“Me! I’m going!”

“No, *my* team’s got first dibs!”

“Ooh ah ah ah ah ahhhhhh!”

Watching the apes rush like an ocean wave, some monsters rushed out of Stage Two to meet them. Unlike Stage One, this important facility hosted powerful monsters. Monsters like Cerberuses, Flame Eaters, Dark Mummies, and Blood Wolves, any of which would give an A-rank adventurer a run for their money, all came out in droves.

Neither army showed any fear as they charged at each other, full-speed, driven by instinct. They came to a high-speed clash in front of the exceedingly lavish Stage Two manor. As blood soaked the ground, the sound of metal beating flesh echoed through the area, and monsters screamed in agony. Their voices soon faded, as the cries of three thousand apes shook the earth. It was a massacre. Each monster might have been stronger than each ape in their own right, but the ape-hybrids fought as a mob. The countless teams swarmed the monsters from all directions, then retreated in unison as the next battalion came in for the attack. They controlled the field itself, not even giving their enemies a chance to bare their fangs. After three of those tsunami-like waves, the horde of monsters turned their backs and began to flee.

“Those scum turned their rear ends on us! Surround them!” the leader called, and the apes formed a single unit, cornering the monsters. As they struck down the monsters from behind, the ape-hybrids flooded into the Stage Two manor.

“Take it down!”

“Don’t leave a wall of this place standing!”

The apes smashed everything in sight with their weapons, leveling the Stage Two facility. Everything there, from the outer perimeter wall, the storage shed, the intricate garden, the masterfully constructed manor and the numerous historical pieces of art within it, was entirely meaningless to the apes, and they smashed it all without hesitation. They captured the humans trying to flee and killed any monsters. For the slaves of Stage Two, the apes were just as violent as those monsters. The one-sided trample elated the ape-hybrids. Then, they found another facility behind Stage Two, and advanced towards it with enthusiasm. It was a particularly large building called The Retreat.

“Are there humans in there, too?”

“Ohh ah ah! Set it on fire.”

“And defy the leader? The humans here are offerings to Lady Tatsu!”

“Urgh, my bad...”

That technically wasn't true, but who could have blamed the apes for interpreting it this way. It was inconceivable for Anima to protect humans, otherwise.

A Hellknight that exemplified “heavy-hitting” appeared before them. “Filthy chimps... Pay with your lives for disturbing the Count's land.” It more closely resembled a mech suit than a person in full armor. The Hellknight swung its giant scythe at a blinding speed, sending three heads flying into the air.

“Wh-What the... How's this even—”

Before it could finish, the remaining ape-hybrid was cut in half, right down the middle from his head to his groin. The Hellknight approached the entrance and tossed the heads and halves of the apes without much care. “Filthy beasts. This scythe will judge every last one of you...” With a large whirl of the scythe, the knight dove into the horde, turning the tables on the apes. In the blink of an eye, everything around the knight was painted red with blood, as the heads were separated from bodies all over the place. ‘Judgment’ was more of a fitting word than ‘battle.’ No matter how much teamwork the apes utilized, they couldn't put a single scratch on the Hellknight's thick armor, and their casualties grew with every second. Before long, the two battalions before the Retreat were nearly destroyed. All the way, the knight never stopped, and the apes couldn't run or call for reinforcements.

Then came a filthy snicker. “Geh heh heh... Seems like you're in a pickle, eh?”

“Master Baldibald!”

“Look everyone, it's Master Baldibald!”

“Ooh ooh! Master Baldibald's brighter than ever!”

“For the last time, my name's Xiaoshou!” the kappa loudly corrected before diving out of the way of the scythe swung at him. Just by seeing that single

blow, the kappa realized that he was dealing with an outrageously powerful monster. A bead of cold sweat dripped down his face. “Now, now, Mister Armor-All... I got no reason to— Geh heh!” Dodging the silent attack of the scythe with a crazy expression on his face, the kappa called out, unabashedly shouting. “Get the leader, everybody! The boss! I can’t handle this thing!”

As the kappa turned his back on the enemy and ran around, the Hellknight scoffed in exasperation. Despite having appeared with a sort of fanfare, the kappa was pathetic and miserable. But suddenly, the kappa’s spear had pierced the knight’s helmet.

“Geh heh heh, you let yourself get co...cky?”

“Pathetic creature...”

The surprise attack had landed perfectly, but the knight’s helmet was too hard, preventing any damage from actually getting through. The kappa barely managed to block the swing of the scythe with the hilt of his spear. A second passed before the kappa was blown away. “That does it! I’ve got no chance against you!” The kappa dropped his spear, and threw his hands in the air in a picture-perfect surrender.

“I offer no path of surrender to filthy beasts.”

“Ah, you’re killing me! We’re all friends on this big brown continent. Why don’t we take it easy for a second!... **Water Gun.**” The kappa spat four water bullets from his mouth, which all struck the knight’s helmet and armor. The impact was powerful enough to push the knight’s torso back for a moment, but nothing more. There wasn’t a scratch on its armor, nor did it seem like it took any sort of damage.

“Oof... That just ain’t fair! My Water Gun blows through Top-Tier armor!” the kappa cried, tears in his eyes.

Meanwhile, the knight remained completely unaffected. “A worthless party trick. Is that all?” the knight said in the same tone, as if it was some robot who wasn’t programmed to feel. “Die, you filthy creature.”

“Geheheheh! Uncle! I cry uncle, good sir!”

The knight swung the scythe without a care, ignoring the cry. However, the

scythe was deflected by a staff that came in like a gust of wind. The knight turned to the intruder.

“You never were much of a fighter...”

Monkey Magic and his elite force had finally come to the rescue.

“Yeah, about time! What drama! Here comes the man at the top of the Top 100 Handsome Anima list! The hottest monkey on the mountain right now! Making *Animania Extreme*, one heroic act at a time!”

“Enough, I know I’m good looking, but that’s too much.”

Watching the comedy skit unfold, the Hellknight re-gripped the scythe. It sized up who it assumed to be the leader of the opposition. “You’re an Animadmiral. Your reputation precedes you.”

“I see you gave my men quite the how-do-you-do. Let me return the favor... seven-fold.” Quiet wrath kindled in the eyes of Monkey Magic. His blood was boiling, seeing the corpses of his kin strewn about.

“You lowly chimp. Your head shall be an offering to the Count.” The knight immediately swiped at the ape with his scythe. Not even a medium-rank devil could withstand this attack without some serious damage. However, Monkey Magic had vanished from the scythe’s arc, and was standing single-footed on the blade. “Wha—!?” Just as the knight noticed, an incredible shock reverberated through his cranium. With a single swing of Jingu Bang, the leader of the apes had caved in the knight’s fortified helmet.

“Feel the wrath of our clan. Not a single one of you will make it out alive.” The ape had no time for sport, either. Monkey Magic landed on the ground, and swung around Jingu Bang at an incredible speed, smashing it into the knight. While it parried the first few strikes, the flurry grew much too fast, overwhelming the knight and relentlessly clobbering it.

“Grr... Ragh... Rrrm...!” the knight groaned. Each and every swing of Jingu Bang was boosted with the Loaded Attack skill. No armor nor helmet stood a chance against it, as the 5 piercing damage per hit rapidly piled up. A few minutes into combat, the knight had been miserably dented. “Animadmiral... Indeed, you are not lowly. Forgive my ignorance.” The knight shifted its stance,

greatly drawing back the scythe. Dark power gathered to it, almost as if the knight was drawing a sinister bow. “Under The Round Table...!”

“Everybody ju—” Monkey Magic shouted, but a moment too late. The high-speed circular attack had sundered the bodies of the most ape-hybrids in the vicinity. Less than ten apes in its path had reacted in time.

“Ooh-ahhhhhhhhhh!” Monkey Magic cried in wrath for his fallen kin. At the same time, he activated every skill he had, ready to deliver a fatal blow with Jingu Bang once and for all.

Monkey Do! Triple Down! Dancing Monkey!

“Plate... Spinner!” Three attacks rained down on the knight like meteors. A nightmarish blow, tripled by Monkey Do, each of them with severely boosted Attack and Dexterity. First, the knight’s right arm went flying, then its left, before the Hellknight split vertically in half.

Monkey Magic panted, his shoulders heaving up and down, large beads of sweat running down his face. “Stupid, hunk of... metal. All this, trouble...” The leader of the apes paid the price for pulling such a powerful move to finish the battle quickly, knowing that prolonging it would only increase their casualties.

“Are you hurt!?” The kappa rushed over.

“D-Don’t worry about me... But we have to...” Monkey Magic stammered, in part from his exhaustion, but mostly because he wasn’t used to conveying complicated ideas.

“I get it! You’re going to turn this place into a bridgehead and make a bigger commotion!”

“Th-That’s right...” the leader of the apes agreed. No one seemed to notice the awkward look in his eyes.

“You planned to draw their attention here and away from Stage Three all along! Yeah, if things keep heating up here, their back-up will come here, too. You’re a mastermind!”

“That’s right...”

“Let’s send the majority of our forces to Stage Three while we got them

distracted!”

“I was just going to say that...”

The kappa continued to speak for the leader, giving well-paced orders to the remaining apes gathering around them. He was less of an advisor and more of a brain surrogate.

“New orders from the boss, everybody! Divvy up the troops into a main battalion, a bait team to stay behind, and several misleading teams to make some noise all around, and also a team to bring back the captured humans to the homeland!” The kappa gathered the leaders of each team, and precisely explained each of their plans and objectives. Each time, the apes cried out great praise.

“Yeah, he ain’t our boss for nothing! He’s always thinking so far ahead!”

“We’re all moved by your monkey mind, boss. The floodgates are open...”

“Master Baldibald, too!”

“Yeah, boss! Yeah, bald!”

“All hail the hairless!”

“I am *not* bald...!”

Hearing the cheers of praise, if one could call it that, put a satisfied grin on Monkey Magic’s face. He and the kappa made quite the team, actually, in terms of one of them taking care of combat and the other strategy.

“Hurry and get ready for the next move!” the leader of the apes cried.

“Aye-Aye!”

As the ape-hybrids reconvened, Hansel found himself trapped in the familiar Retreat. This chain of events was entirely unimaginable. First, the apes crossed the border, and then the defense team of Stage Two lost to them. Worst of all, however, was the defeat of the Hellknight, one of Count Impaler’s most trusted servants. Hansel’s brain failed to follow even the events that shook out before him.

“How did this happen...!?”

Hansel ran through the secret passageway, desperately searching for a safe location. Cake hurried after him, convinced that she would become enslaved by the apes, otherwise. Cake shared the popular opinion among humans that demi-humans were just as bad as Hellions, and that some species were even more violent and cruel to humans. It was common practice for human clerics to declare demi-humans to be impure, so no one could have blamed Cake for instinctively running away.

“Dammit, what’s happening...? I’ve gotta let this blow over from in here...” Hansel slipped into the heavily-secured hidden room underground. Just as he went to wipe the sweat off of his forehead, he noticed a foreign object in the room. “What the hell are you doing here!?”

“Um, I... was just trying to...!”

“The hell!? This is *my* hidden... Hm? Wait a minute.” A curious thought crept into Hansel’s mind. The beginning of all of these unimaginable occurrences had been this human kid. The more he thought about it, the more suspicious Hansel grew. “This better not be a scheme of yours...”

“What...!?”

“It was strange that Master Kale would give such an order to begin with, not to mention a shit stain like you coming to Stage Two... What are you scheming at!? Say it!”

“I haven’t... Nothing...!”

“I know you’re tar-black on the inside... You thought I never noticed?” Hansel grabbed Cake by her neck and squeezed it tight. He knew very well that the girl’s frail exterior was nothing but a façade for her pitch-black soul. He could sense it, beyond any knowledge or experience... that the kid was similar to him. She wagged her tail at the strong and acted obedient while twirling a knife behind her back, waiting for her moment to gain power. The epitome of shrewdness. Hansel felt like he was looking into a weird mirror. For some reason, that made Hansel want to squeeze harder and squash her existence. “Why would those apes protect the humans instead of killing them...? It’s impossible!”

“How... should I know— Agh!”

“You want your neck broken? You’re gone with the twist of my finger. Who cares if you’re Master Kale’s toy? It’ll just be an accident, now.” Hansel put a little more force in his grip, turning Cake’s face bright red. Watching her pathetically flail her limbs about, a sadistic grin appeared on Hansel’s face.



“What’s the matter? How many fingernails is it going to take for me to *pry* it out of you this time?” The mention of that triggered a memory within Cake, causing tears to come to her eyes. Hansel’s face twisted further in twisted glee as he started cackling. “Yeh hah ha! That’s right, garbage like you should spend your life crying like that! Remember who you are now, you useless trash?”

Cake gritted her teeth, and was met with Hansel’s demonic laugh. Her life had always been this way since her country fell. No matter how many tears she shed or how clever she tried to be, violence beat her down in the end. Her country had fallen to violence, and she couldn’t even survive on her own without strength. Her days of forcing herself to be cold, calculated, and manipulative were coming to an end.

(Fuck you, dad... Leon...) Her fading mind imagined her spectacularly useless father and the best advisor she ever had. The former was dead, and the latter nowhere to be found. At the very least, she couldn’t expect either of them to come and rescue her now. (No one’s... going to save me... No one even knows I’m alive...!) The thought that everyone she once knew must consider her long-dead soaked Cake’s brain with red. The realization hit: the world would keep on turning even after she was gone. She survived by eating dirt in this hell, and no one had heard her cries. So, Cake spat at the heinous face she saw. It was a desperate struggle. To taunt the devil. To survive.

“Y-You little...! What do you think you’re doing!?” Hansel tossed Cake aside, smashing her into a wooden shelf. Despite the shattering pain through her body, Cake’s lips curled from a sensation she hadn’t felt in a long time. A sort of triumphant glee. “You scum... What’re you laughing at!?” Wiping her spit off with a handkerchief, Hansel kicked Cake in the side. Many of her ribs broke, and much blood flooded from her mouth. Even still, her expression remained unchanged. She had made a gamble that someone might hear this commotion.

“Be, careful... If anyone hears... it won’t be... an accident...”

Hansel’s expression shifted. He had a chance of escaping Kale’s wrath if an ape had killed her, but not if it got out that he had done the deed himself. Hansel had enough of this girl laying on the ground. “That’s exactly what I hate about you!”

Just before Cake's face was stomped to nothing, a faint voice rang from above. Whether it was monster or ape, it had appeared as if Cake's will to live had summoned it. Hansel shut his mouth, listening intently.

"It's like an escape room in here... I just heard a sound, way below."

"Hm? I didn't hear anything... Well, some high-status devils create hidden passages and rooms in their manors. If anyone's 'below' us, that's why."

A conversation between a man and a woman, who sounded close to the age of a girl. While the hidden room was soundproofed, it amplified outside sounds with magical items.

"Let's take a look, anyhow," the man said.

"Wait, these kinds of places have a lot of traps. If we're not careful about disarming each one, we could encounter more enemies, take damage, or even be infected with poison."

"How tedious... I'm not going to waste time doing that."

"You said it. We have nothing to do here, anyway. I thought we were just going to the castle."

The conversation felt like a death sentence to Cake. She tried to scream out to them, but Hansel was covering her mouth, his face twisted in a victorious grin.

(Still... nothing... I'm going to lose, all over again...!) No matter how hard Cake struggled, Hansel didn't budge. More tears fell from Cake's eyes, this time out of pure frustration. (There is no god or Light or anything in this world...! Just devilish creatures acting like they own the place!) Cake cursed against her fading consciousness. Both the Light and angels had vanished from the world, but devils still lingered. While that alone seemed helpless, new monsters had even emerged since the disappearance of the angels.

"Hm... Two figures below. I'm taking a shortcut," the voice said above. Cake didn't know what he meant, and apparently neither did the woman he was with.

"Shortcut?" she asked. "Hey, what are y—! I t-told you not to grab—!"

"First Skill — Charge! Hold onnn!"

After that strange exchange above, the entirety of the manor quaked, and part of the ceiling came crashing down. A black shadow emerged from the pile of rubble and dust, someone in a pitch-black long coat, with black hair that seemed utterly foreign to this world. Perhaps Cake's desperation had reached someone, after all. Not another Hellion, nor ape-hybrid, nor an old friend... Not even a person of this world, in fact, but the Demon Lord of the Empire. Despite his overall, evil-looking appearance, he seemed like a black angel who came from the sky. The girl he carried at his side muttered something, clearing Cake's mind somewhat.

"Hey, Demon Lord... What are you doing!? Destroying the manor as we go!? Or is it some Fallen Angel *policy* to rampage while carrying a protesting woman by your side!?"

"How insulting. Utilizing shortcuts to mitigate time loss is an important strategy of advancing gameplay."

"There you go again, trying to brush it under the rug with nonsense! Am I not even worth a decent explanation to you!?"

They seemed to be engaged in a couple's quarrel, or perhaps a father-daughter quarrel. But Cake didn't hear the majority of it. How could she have? The only words that rang in her ear were 'Demon Lord' and 'Fallen Angel,' words that no one living an ordinary life would ever hear. Cake, who had long awaited her salvation, and had her spirit close to broken after all this time. She accepted the bizarre words at face value. (Oh... Instead of an Angel, a Demon Lord came to take me...) For some reason, Cake felt a laugh beginning to swell. There she was, a fallen princess with a heart of darkness, and the Lord of Demons who fell from the bright world above and ended up ruling the night. She could only laugh at such a fated encounter. (Ahahaha! What better salvation is there...?) As her mind faded, she could see the Demon Lord approaching, and Hansel groveling before the girl who had accompanied him.

"M-Mademoiselle...! What a glorious honor to be graced with your presence in a place like this! My colleagues will be green with envy!" said the opportunistic voice.

While Hansel continued groveling and rambling, Cake only saw one man now.

His glare was sharp, and a single look from him made Cake hard to breathe. With the last drop of strength within her, she spoke in a frail voice. “Master... Demon Lord...”

More tears came flooding out. She couldn’t tell if it was because she had encountered a supernatural existence, or because she was thankful that her salvation had finally come, or perhaps because she was happy to experience such a dream at the end.

The Demon Lord’s expression changed, and he stuck his hand into a void, before producing two white, glowing spheres.

“Craft Food! Vegetable Soup, Cheesecake!” With that strange incantation, the glowing spheres changed into... food. Cake wondered if this really was a dream she was watching at the end of her life. Even still, the soup had an excellent scent that she hadn’t smelled in a long time.

“Hm... Once you drink that soup and calm down, try some of these snacks.”

Cake wondered why the mythical Demon Lord, who once ruled the night, smelled so good.

(Tsk, the *mademoiselle* . Guess I *am* saved...) Hansel let out a sigh of relief, a hand on his chest. He recognized one of the faces beyond the cloud of dust. If the apes had been the ones to come in, he would have been toast. Worst case, it could have also been a pair of devils to watch over him. With an elegant twirl of his mustache, he bowed again. “To behold the mademoiselle in such a place... Oh, I never hoped for this in my wildest dreams! I must say, that mode of entry was quite the shock.” Hansel snuck in a little sting in his humble greeting. He had heard that the mademoiselle was ‘out there,’ but destroying a building to make her way in was just too much.

“I had nothing to do with it. This guy did it on his own.”

“You mean that in jest, surely...” Hansel muttered. The Retreat was a sort of annex reserved for high-level Hellions. That meant that not only were the interior and amenities extravagant, but steadily reinforced. Breaking through such a defense required incredible strength. “In any case, a human servant... In my humble, overstepping opinion, may the mademoiselle consider allowing something more tolerable than this *fly* buzzing around herself.” Even as he said

so, Hansel thought that they were a good match. The filthy, mixed-blood Firebrand with a human servant, which was actually worse than a buzzing fly to him. In fact, it was almost comical. He had employed surface-level respect since she was his king's daughter, but all Hansel felt for Firebrands like Olgan was detest and disgust. It was fair to say that most Hellions shared this sentiment.

"Why don't you see for yourself if he's a 'buzzing fly'?" Olgan said, and turned away from lack of interest.

Hansel turned to find the man approaching him, having put the food down for the girl. "You," he called. "What did you do to her?"

Hansel's temple twitched. It was bad enough that a mere human was speaking to him, let alone his demanding attitude. "You think you're safe because you serve the mademoiselle? I didn't give you permission to speak, bug."

"Are you deaf? I asked, 'What did you do?'"

"Now this is just... Mademoiselle, might I train this one? I may kill it in the process."

"Whatever." Olgan sat on a piece of rubble, resting her chin in her palm.

Seeing her lack of interest, Hansel assumed that Olgan kept the human as a toy. "While I see the merit in keeping a human toy, training is the backbone of maintenance. The Count, as well as the king, have created these facilities with the very purpose of conditioning humans into obedient livestock... Oh, Mademoiselle, are you here to board this human?" (Why didn't you just say so?) Hansel put a cigar in his mouth as he tossed a small Spell Stone at the Demon Lord. "Mademoiselle. Let us return to the castle and report this incident. We can always come back to condition this one." Hansel stuck his chin out, pointing to his cigar. That ignited the fires of hell for Hansel.

(Scared the crap out of me..!) The Demon Lord was desperately holding down his boiling anger a few moments before Hansel put the cigar in his mouth. He had likened Cake in her dress, perhaps because of her stature, to Aku for an instant. He reflexively whipped out some food, but Hakuto Kunai didn't have the skill to change those into a rare item. (What's a kid in a dress doing a place like this...?) The Demon Lord scratched his head and frowned at the severe

punch mark on the girl's face, as well as the painful streak of blood from her mouth down to her chest. Naturally, the Demon Lord concluded that this freakazoid must have been the one who hurt the girl.

Now, that freakazoid was ordering him to light a cigar. The Demon Lord's shoulders shook with anger and his patience was exceeded.

"You're useless, too!" the devil shouted. "You get two seconds to light a cigar once I've got it in my mouth! Can't even figure that out, bug!?"

"What do you think this is, a strip club?" Tossing the Spell Stone aside, the Demon Lord pulled out a Zippo from his pocket, and held it to Hansel's chin.

"H-H-Hot! The hell are you doing!?" Hansel reflexively rose his fist, ready to slam it into the Demon Lord's face, which was naturally stopped by Assault Queller. "What the...? A magic— Gragh!" Hansel was cut short by the Demon Lord's light jab to his gut.

Watching Hansel buckle at the knees and groan in agony, the Demon Lord dramatically put a cigarette in his mouth, and gestured to it with a wag of a finger. "Useless. When I put a cigarette in my mouth, you light it. I won't wait two seconds."

"Gra... agh... Y-You don't get... what you did..."

"I asked you what you did to that girl. Are your ears decorative?" Lighting his cigarette, the Demon Lord squatted low to the ground and grabbed Hansel's chin. His demeanor was becoming of someone who liked to play a *bosozoku* character. "You beat up that little girl? It was the same thing with Aku, everyone here's savage..." The Demon Lord took the cigarette from his mouth, and put it out on Hansel's forehead. A sizzle and Hansel's yelp followed. "You're not useless, after all. You make a half-decent ashtray." In terms of savagery, the Demon Lord was calling the kettle black. In fact, he looked like nothing short of a yakuza don paying retribution to a member who screwed up.

"U-Um! Thank, you...!"

The Demon Lord turned around to find the little girl, fully recovered, repeatedly bowing in gratitude. The Vegetable Soup and Cheesecake had healed her HP and Stamina. The Demon Lord stood up, and called to the girl as

she approached him. “Uh, where to start...? What’s your name?”

The girl pinched the ends of her skirt, and gave a ceremonious curtsy. It was a graceful and dignified gesture. “Thank you for saving from that devil. I am the firstborn of the King of Palma, Shortcake Dowell La Tour Rarecheese Palma.”

(Jeez...! There’s a few foods in there, too!)

The Demon Lord’s must have worn his reaction to these names on his face, as Cake embarrassedly shifted her gaze down with a shy smile. It was an adorable gesture, but it was calculated in its entirety. “I-It’s too long, isn’t it...? If you could call me Cake, for short— Oh! I mean, I would never dictate how you called me, Master Demon Lord... Oh...”

“That would make it easier for me...”

Olgan raised a brow upon hearing Cake’s name. She recognized the country. “The princess of Palma?” she asked. “That nation fell a few years ago.”

“That’s right... My country fell to the invasion of New Xenobia...”

“I heard that the princess of Palma was never found. And that she was captive to the advisor of Xenobia.”

“I didn’t... know that... Captive...”

As he listened to this exchange, the Demon Lord relit the cigarette in his mouth and breathed out a large puff of smoke. He recognized the name Xenobia, too. (Wasn’t that the country with the weird ninja-looking...?) His memory was fuzzy, as he considered the event insignificant. On the other hand, the little girl before him asked Olgan all sorts of questions, nodding at times and showing a dejected expression at others.

“I see... Leon is in Xenobia...”

“Apparently he’s been dragged from one battlefield to another. That man is almost too powerful to be a human.”

Cake pondered for some time. She had caught on to Xenobia’s tactic from the mention of her ‘captivity.’ They must have acted like they were taking her hostage to Leon in order to forcibly make him serve Xenobia. Cake could picture Kongming’s smug expression, now.

The Demon Lord felt like he should know more about Xenobia, so he chimed in. “What kind of country is this Xenobia?”

“It’s a terrible country... They’ve destroyed many nations on top of mine with impunity. Their ambitions are endless...”

“Oh?”

“Many lost their lives... My father, our people, all of our soldiers...”

“I see.”

Cake spoke of Xenobia, with a dose of crocodile tears, in a way that she thought would maximize the Demon Lord’s sympathy. Even so, the Demon Lord only followed along without showing much of a reaction. He was generally uninterested in other nations, and only recognized the universal brutality in losing war. (Expanding their territory without regard to anything but self-interest... Just like the Empire. And just like plenty of countries in the history of Earth. They’ve all collapsed or dwindled in some way. There’s no conquering superpower, now.) Nothing lasts forever... That was a thought that had come to mind when he was speaking to Olgan at some point. The Demon Lord shook his head to chase the thought away, and turned to the devil, who finally returned to his feet.

“I’ve got a question for you, too. I thought this was a slave market, but it looks like some noble vacation house. What’s going on here?”

“Mademoiselle...” Hansel gave a begrudging look to Olgan, but she kept looking in another direction. She was going to let the Demon Lord run amok. The egg was clearly on Hansel’s face. “You hornless half-bake...” A curse slipped out of his lips.

Olgan stood with rage. “Say that again.”

“I don’t understand you, Mademoiselle... If we don’t notify the castle of what’s happening soon, your position may become precarious, too. The Count should arrive any minute,” Hansel snickered.

“Choose how to die. Burned to a crisp or torn to pieces.”

Seeing Olgan at the brink of eruption, the Demon Lord interjected. “Hold on.

Wait until I hear what I need.” He hadn’t gotten any questions answered by Devil-with-the-stache.

“What is there to ask him? Anyways, you always get—” Olgan lost her words, seeing that the Demon Lord had produced something from the black void.

“You want horns? Here. Just be quiet for a while.” He held a low-rank item called Devilish Horns. It had a Defense of 2, and much like the Angel’s Ring he had given White, it was utterly useless as a piece of armor. However, the item was always popular as a fashion piece, preferred by many female players.

“How... Can you...?” Olgan muttered, as Hansel watched with his jaw on the floor.

Horns were the epitome of a devil’s power and intellect. The bigger and thicker the better. Powerful devils all grew horns, and showed them off to convey their superiority without fighting. However, Firebrands couldn’t grow horns... No matter how much effort or magic they put in, they were never able to grow a pair of horns. This was one of the reasons why Firebrands were discriminated against by other Hellions.

“This one’s a set of curly horns. Keep your hood up, and you won’t draw attention in the city. Some are straight, but those are old designs...” The Demon Lord continued rambling on, oblivious to the significance of horns for the devils.

Meanwhile, Olgan’s eyes were glued to the item he had produced. There it was: the one thing she had longed for all of her life. “They’re so beautiful...” Olgan absentmindedly walked over to the Demon Lord, entranced by the horns. It was a cute pair of horns, if anything, but his world materialized Akira Ono’s creations down to every word of flavor text.

“Beautiful? I’ll take it as a compliment...” The horns, naturally, exuded a sinister power, and were even designed with the power to ‘burn those who approach without caution.’ Of course, Akira had meant it as a jab at the ‘devilish women’ who wore this sort of accessory, but even that had been brought to life in a literal sense. “I don’t know what you’re mad about, but make this work.” He transferred the item to Olgan, and the pair of Devilish Horns were equipped on her head.

The Demon Lord acted like a father trying to console his daughter with a gift,

but this was nothing short of a turning point in her life. Olgan's breath was taken away by the unmistakable energy on her head. She remembered the countless insults thrown at her throughout her life. Mixed-blood, half-bake, mock-Hellion, mutt... No matter how hard she worked or how many powers she gained, this had always been the unscalable wall in her path that had tormented. Just now, the wall came crashing down...



“Hm. Not too shabby.” The Demon Lord cracked a nonchalant smile, oblivious to Olgan’s emotions. He had simply been impressed by the quality of his item and how well it suited Olgan.

“I’m speechless,” Olgan finally muttered.

“Glad to hear it,” the Demon Lord answered, taking it literally. He had given it to her to quiet her down in the first place. The fact that he perceived and created misunderstandings everywhere he went made it seem like he was born under some bizarre alignment of stars.

“I’ll stay out of it... He’s all yours.” Olgan slumped back down onto the piece of rubble, pulling her hood down over her eyes as far she could, attempting to conceal the tears welling up.

Having watched this exchange, Cake was even more assured that she was in the presence of the true Demon Lord. Hansel had gone beyond confusion, practically petrified from shock. It was impossible for a human to simply generate a pair of devil horns for themselves, much less grant horns to someone else.

“Now, we finally get back on track.”

Hansel’s shoulders shook at the Demon Lord’s utterance. He was beginning to understand that he was dealing with no mere human, let alone a bug, but something beyond his imagination. “What are you, b— b— b— baronial majesty...?”

“You don’t deserve the answer. What is this facility, and what were you doing here?”

“Th-This is a place to train humans...”

“Train? I thought this was a slave market.”

Hansel muddled through explaining the three stages of the Slave Market, including how they weeded out the unsuitable in Stage One, then conditioned them in Stage Two before they finally became ‘merchandise’ in Stage Three.

The Demon Lord exhaled a puff of smoke and shook his head. “Putting humans in tiers... It’s like a cattle farm.” He recalled how in cattle farms in

Japan, cows were ranked by letters and numbers, where A-5 ranked the highest and became prized beef. “So, what rank is that kid?”

“Th-That brat is still in Stage One... We have too much useless clutter, really...” Hansel snickered, as if to test the water, to which the Demon Lord replied with a chuckle. Just as Hansel smirked, thinking that he was beginning to reach an understanding with the man... The back of the Demon Lord’s fist had smashed into his face. Hansel curled up from the pain, having his nose shattered. “Gheahh!”

“It’s your prerogative to rank or categorize humans and other species all you want, but it’s our prerogative to bear our fangs in revolt of your ‘system.’”

“Y-You bastard...! That does it!” Drawing his One-of-a-Kind dagger, Hansel moved to stab the Demon Lord in the abdomen, which was naturally bounced off by Assault Queller. The knife was flung from Hansel’s hand and made a *clank* as it bounced on the floor. “What... The hell is this wall!?”

“There’s no cure for unwillingness to learn. The only ones who deserve to face me are the heroes who’ve overcome all their weaknesses and fears to max themselves out. You don’t even hold a candle to them.” With a swift chop, the Demon Lord had flipped Hansel on his back like a frog. The attack wasn’t lethal, as the Demon Lord still had some questions in mind.

Even still, Hansel suffered devastating damage. With his brain rattled, and his blurring vision assaulting him with nausea, he bravely shouted out. “Just you wait! *The Count Impaler* will soon arrive, and—”

Just as Hansel attempted to stand, a shadow rushed at him. Suddenly, there was a blade deep in Hansel’s head.

“What?” the Demon Lord muttered.

“Heh heh heh... Hah hah hah...!” Cake cackled, Hansel’s dagger in hand. Her expression was devoid of any sanity, completely foreign to her usual, dainty behavior. As the Demon Lord watched, frozen, Cake pulled out the dagger and plunged it in again. “Hya hah hah ha! Who’s laughing now, motherfucker!? I’ve been *dreaming* for a chance like this! To bleed, your, fucking, head, with, your, own, stupid, knife!”

“Gahagh... Ahagh... Wait—”

“Shut up...! Your breath reeks like shit! Your brain must be full of it, huh!? I’ll cut you to shreds, fucker!” Screaming, Cake kept thrusting the dagger into Hansel’s face, straddling his chest. As she stabbed him repeatedly, Cake’s face, dress, and hands were all soaking bright red. She finally stopped after some time, apparently too exhausted to lift the dagger another time. “Get fucked in hell, you shit-stain.”

Meanwhile, Olgan kept her head down, as if she didn’t even notice the entire exchange, and the Demon Lord alone was completely flummoxed. What man wouldn’t be? (Jeesh! Does this kid have split personalities!?) Her flowy dress only added to the gruesomeness of the situation. The Demon Lord took a deep drag of his cigarette, followed by a long, pensive exhale. “I don’t know what prompted all that, but how about you calm down...?”

“Oh.” Cake snapped out of her daze. Hiding the dagger behind her back, she dismounted Hansel’s body with a sweet-as-can-be smile. “I... I’m sorry! I noticed this dreadful devil trying to harm you, Master Demon Lord, and I just...!”

“You looked like the real devil to me...”

“Oh, how horrible! I was only concerned for your safety, Master Demon Lord... My body moved on its own... Oh, my...”

“Well, as long as your body— You think I believe that crap!? Who are you, Ichiro Ogami!?”

Despite the Demon Lord’s strange counterpoint, Cake still stuck to her story, as her face and dress remained deep red. She looked nothing short of a horror game character. “I-I swear! I was only concerned for your safety... Oh... What can I do to help you believe me, Master Demon Lord...?”

“I mean, I can imagine how much stress you’ve had bottled up...” the Demon Lord said, taking another drag of his smoke to compose himself. He imagined that anyone would have exploded if they had been tormented by that freak of a devil since they were a child. Even the Demon Lord himself had slugged the devil in the gut, used his forehead as an ashtray, smashed his nose with the back of a fist, and threw in a WWE-style chop to knock him down, all on his very first encounter with the devil. Given the length of time each party had to spend

with the freak, the Demon Lord was the unreasonable one. “Sounds like things upstairs are settled down,” he said. “Olgan, next step.”

“Huh...? Oh, right.”

“Were you asleep, just now?”

“N-No. Just lost in my thoughts, a bit...” Olgan answered, a little out of sorts. She felt like she was still in a dream, somehow, as she relished in the sensation of a pair of bona-fide horns on her head.

“Alright. Then it’s time for the next distraction.” The Demon Lord wore an evil grin. Through defending the Sleepless Castle, the final arena of the Game, he had become a master of sieges, and he knew exactly how to make a fortress crumble. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen a good show like this.” Nonchalantly picking up both girls, the Demon Lord Quick Traveled above. The usually bickering Olgan remained silent, and Cake invisibly blushed her blood-soaked cheeks.

(Now, *this* is a party...) The Demon Lord saw the entrance to the Retreat flooded with ape-hybrids working to reconfigure their formation. All of them seemed satisfied that they had given their hated Hellions a good beating. Their morale was insanely high, in fact, enough that the Demon Lord could feel the heat from the monkey army.

Monkey Magic approached him, grinning. “You were a little too late, Dark God... I’ve taken care of... Who’s that?” He frowned, seeing Cake soaked in blood. She was a bizarre sight to behold, even for an Animadmiral.

“Don’t worry about her. What do you mean ‘Dark God’?”

“You. I’ll call you False God if you don’t like it.”

“With the stupid nicknames... Whatever. You brought the wooden box, didn’t you?”

The leader of the apes gestured with his chin, and one of his monkeys brought over a wooden box, just as the Demon Lord had instructed. “Looks like you can at least handle carrying things.” The Demon Lord remarked and opened the box. He produced cylinders of various sizes along with some strange spheres.

“What’s all that?” Monkey Magic asked. “Some kind of false-god ritual?”

“This is an item called Fireworks. The best distraction there is.” These were straight-up pyrotechnics, the same artisanal fireworks famous for lighting up the summer Japanese sky, their sizes ranging from #3 to #30. “You put the ball in the cylinder and light the fuse. Then it’s party time.” The Demon Lord chuckled.

The rest of the field, however, had no idea why he was laughing. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I’d better just show you. Let’s step outside.” The Demon Lord walked right out, and the leader of the apes reluctantly followed. Olgan silently followed suit, wondering what bizarre thing the Demon Lord was up to now. Then Cake followed, excited about what might happen.

They stepped outside to find that the sun was already setting, making for quite the view. The party was greeted by Xiaoshou, who watched them come out with a curious look.

“What’s going on, Mister Shadow?”

“I’ll have you do what I’m about to do, but all over the place.” The Demon Lord loaded the smallest firework, #3, into a cylinder, then cracked a grin.

Fireworks was an item that once existed in the game, but it had no damage capabilities, nor any other special effects other than drawing players in for a party. When launched, the fireworks would notify all logged-in users of the location where they were fired from. The notification lasted ten seconds for #3, twenty seconds for #4, and a whopping four minutes for the largest, #30. Without causing any damage, the item often incited all sorts of rumors among the players. Was there a rare piece of treasure? Was it a signal for help? A notification of a chimera deployment? Or perhaps a sitting-duck player? In any case, it was human nature to be attracted to it. In fact, players had gathered to them, causing fights and battle royales, plunging the area into chaos with the help of Gunshots and Explosions. It was an item fit for a festival. It spelled doom for any player unlucky enough to be resting in an area where they went off, but for those looking to gain experience, it was a phenomenon similar to a dungeon swarm in this world.

“Let the festivities begin.” The Demon Lord laid out the rest of the cylinders an equal distance apart and lit the fuse of a #3. As everyone watched with curiosity, the Demon Lord quietly stepped away and covered his ears. The fire on the fuse crept towards the cylinder, crackling all the way. Suddenly, a light moving upwards, followed by a roaring boom, a giant neon flower blooming in the sky.

“Ooh-ahhhhh!”

“Geheh!”

The leader of the apes and the kappa jumped at the thunderous sound, and the other ape-hybrids began running around, all of their hairs on end. They must have thought that the blast was some sort of attack spell. Olgan simply stared up at the sky, and Cake thought that it was quite beautiful.

“As you can see, it draws people’s attention. Perfect distraction.” The Demon Lord lit the fuse to a #4 and leapt onto the roof above the entrance to the retreat, sitting cross-legged, and enjoying a smoke. He had scored a prime viewing spot.

“What was that, False God!? Did you summon a calamity from the Dark Star!?”

“Ha! It was a calamity for some players, I must admit.” As the Demon Lord laughed, smoke puffing out of his mouth, a sharp whistle sounded, signaling the launch of the firework. Another neon flower bloomed, higher than the one before. Even as the apes cowered at the thunderous bang, they couldn’t help but keep their eyes glued to the sky. They saw beauty in the giant flower’s momentary bloom and disappearance. (This brings back memories,) the Demon Lord reminisced. (There were fireworks whenever players stormed the Sleepless Castle, too... They kept shooting more and more, until there were like 10,000 fireworks in a night.) Exhaling another puff of smoke, the Demon Lord threw Sodom’s Fire to light another fuse with precision. With a few beats in between, the Demon Lord threw one blazing dagger after another. A #5, 6, and 7 fired in succession to fill the night sky with flashes of light. More apes began to cheer now, rather than cower.

Cake’s expression began to brighten as she stared skyward. It seemed she saw

a glimmer of something other than the beauty of the fireworks. (The Demon Lord... The Demon Lord! He's unreal! If I can dupe this guy, I can even make Xenobia regret what they did!) She seemed as jubilant and innocent as can be, in stark contrast to her thoughts. Cake's plan continued to fester as a #8 bloomed in the sky.

"Now for the big guns... #10, 20, 30... Huh?" As the Demon Lord gleefully threw more daggers, Olgan floated onto the roof and sat down beside him without a word. For some reason, she was looking away from him, and appeared hardly content. (Was the gift too juvenile? I could have given her a better piece of gear to protect her head,) he cluelessly wondered. He only saw Devilish Horns as a fashion accessory without any practicality. He simply pulled it out because they had mentioned horns. "You've been quiet for a while. You don't like the horns?"

"That's not a fair question..."

(Who's not being fair!?) the Demon Lord silently groaned, but Olgan kept her face hidden, concealing her true emotions. He had no way of knowing how much weight a pair of horns carried for Firebrands, so reaching an understanding seemed unlikely. (I know just the thing...!) The Demon Lord thought of the *Kadsunowaki Tatekabuto*, a fearsome-looking helmet from the feudal era. It belonged to Honda Tadakatsu, a shogun who fought valiantly through his era, and was praised by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the soon to be regent of Japan. "Honda Tadakatsu in the east is one of the fiercest warriors of the land," he had said. The helmet, just as its name suggested in Japanese, depicted an impressive pair of deer antlers. If the Demon Lord had offered her this first, Olgan would have probably clocked him in the face. "Fine, then... I have this helmet—" Just as the Demon Lord was about to suggest it, the big #10 bloomed in the darkening sky. This firework had flown three times higher and bloomed five times larger. Even the Demon Lord was entranced by the glimmering lights in the heavens.

Watching the flower of light bloom and fall, Olgan muttered, quietly. "These horns are something I've always dreamed of... I knew I had no chance of ever getting them, but still couldn't give up."

"I see..."

“No matter how hard we try, Firebrands can never grow horns... Well, look who I’m talking to.”

(First time I’m hearing of it...!) The Demon Lord became dismayed at this the-more-you-know fact about Firebrand biology. He was reminded of a devil named Carnival, who he had encountered in the Holy City. That devil had a pair of horns, which the Demon Lord had snapped with the throw of a stone.

“Why did you give me these horns...?”

The Demon Lord met Olgan’s question with a stretch of implicit silence, cigarette in his mouth. He was desperately thinking of an acceptable answer, while being relieved that he didn’t pull out that helmet from feudal Japan. Said helmet, by the way, boasted an overpowered Defense of 18.

With gravitas, the Demon Lord answered, “That’s not for me put into words.” He looked like a politician in an ethics review. He was avoiding a straight answer at all costs.

“You’re telling me to decide? Then—” A #20 soared into the air, its whistle cutting Olgan off. This firework was a massive thing, flying 500 meters into the air before exploding into a diameter of 480 meters. The overwhelming firework left Olgan, as well as the ape-hybrids, breathless.

“Now... Let’s get ready for our next move. I suppose I’ll take that kid to the Hideout, first.” The Demon Lord swiftly left the roof in an attempt to avoid any further horn-related questions. He tossed his cigarette into his portable ashtray and approached the leader of the apes. A crowd of ape-hybrids grew around them, as they seemed to recognize some godly aspect in this human. “Now, I want you to shoot up fireworks like this all around.” The Demon Lord produced nine more wooden boxes from a void and placed them on the ground. The plan was clear: cause a distraction. “Take care handling them. No fire anywhere near them,” said the man who had just been taking a drag from a cigarette.

Amused by the idea, the leader of the apes gave a big nod. “I’m in, False God! I’ll make those flowers bloom in the sky and scare the pants off of them!”

“I’m not a false—”

“Not fair, Leader! We want in!”

“Ooh-ah-ah-ah-ahhh!”

“Ooh-ah! Someone bring me some dirty monkeys! Let’s drink to our victory!”

The Demon Lord walked away, exhausted by the cacophony of apes, and strode over to Cake. He could only chuckle now at her blood-soaked attire. “You should wait for us at the Hideout. There’s a bath there, too. Clean up.”

“Y-Yes, Sir! I’d be a little embarrassed... But I’ll clean you all over, Master Demon Lord!”

“*You’re* the one who needs a bath.” The Demon Lord grabbed Cake’s body and Quick Traveled.

Shortly after, the final #30 illuminated the sky. It had flown up over 600 meters, as high as the Tokyo Skytree or the Shanghai Tower, and nearly encompassed the entire sky. The ape-hybrids were fully overwhelmed and threw their hands into the air. All the oppression they’d felt, the excitement at striking back against the Hellions, and the magical beauty of the fireworks all converged in an explosion of excitement.

Amidst the roaring chaos, Olgan watched the impression of light the firework had left in the sky. “I get to decide....” she muttered.

As Olgan was pondering something ambiguous, the Demon Lord had jumped to the Hideout and began giving Cake the tour. “This is the cedar bath. Clean off all of that blood.”

“Cedar... bath...!” Cake’s eyes glimmered at seeing hot water for the first time in so long. She used to take baths back in her castle, but that was nothing near as aesthetically pleasing as this. The bath in the castle had only been a big metal bucket full of water, heated with Spell Stones. The aroma coming from the cedar alone made it evident to her that this bath would be a completely different experience.

“There’s soap there, too. You can wash your clothes with that.” While ordinary soap wouldn’t get devil’s blood out, the soap created and designed by this man would make that possible. It was so ridiculous that it bordered on industrial. “Stay here until we return. Don’t leave this place under *any* circumstances,” he emphasized. He couldn’t guarantee her safety if she were to

wander off while he wasn't there.

"Y-Yes, Sir...! U-Um, Master Demon Lord...?" Cake called to him, as he was about to leave.

"Hm?"

"Thank you so much for your kindness. I swear on all of Palma that I will never forget this."

"Don't worry about it. It was just a coincidence that I found you." The Demon Lord Quick Traveled and disappeared.

His miraculous mode of transportation should have been an astonishing sight in its own right, but Cake seemed to have already become acclimated to it. In fact, she was preoccupied with mulling over what he meant by 'coincidence.' (A coincidence? After he stormed Belphegor's market? What kind of monster is he!?) Come to think of it, Cake realized that the commotion she heard coming from Stage One must have been the Demon Lord's doing, also. The act was far beyond any form of politics, but a full-blown declaration of war.

(Forget it, the water's getting cold!) Cake yanked off her blood-soaked dress and poured the hot water onto herself, sitting beside the tub in the washing area. She couldn't describe how good that felt if she tried. Then, she cleaned every inch of her body with the bar of soap. She was laughably dirty, even under the blood, from being in an unhygienic environment for so long. She had never really had any chance to worry about how filthy she actually was.

"This soap is fucking awesome! *Everything* comes right off!" She ran the bar over her face, hair, body... and all her grime was purged. She could feel it, too. After thoroughly scrubbing her body, Cake poured a bucket of hot water over her head a few times before emerging a sparkling clean girl. "Heh, guess who's back?" Cake confidently spoke to her reflection in the mirror. While one of the effects of the cedar bath was to make the user feel pampered, this influence was undoubtedly boosted by Cake's natural temperament. She sank shoulder-deep into the tub, and an indescribable feeling welled up in the form of a sigh. The water was just right, neither lukewarm nor too hot. The experience was so luxurious that Cake felt like all of the suffering she had endured was now washed away into the past.

After enjoying the bath for a good while, Cake began to calculate. (What to do first...?) For starters, she had to make it back to a region populated by humans. This already seemed close to impossible on her own, but entirely possible if she stuck with the Demon Lord. Then, she wanted to contact her old friend. This, too, seemed easy as long as she could take care of the first problem. (The real issue is Leon...) The cogs turned rapidly in Cake's mind. If he was told that she had been locked away, and being forced to serve Xenobia because of it, it wouldn't be easy for Cake to make the truth reach Leon. Surely, they were taking every precaution to censor any information delivered to him. Cake pictured the beautiful Beatrice, who had been called the Ruler of the North or the Golden Lion, as well as Kongming, the Ice-Cold Advisor. (Xenobia...) Cake silently growled. At the end of the day, however, she couldn't help but acknowledge Kongming's evil genius. Come to think of it, Cake's country fell for one of Kongming's schemes after another, earning significant victories on the battlefield, but practically spelling their own demise in the end. Many nations throughout history had forsaken and judged heroes of their time. Of course, most of those nations crumbled. (Just stop it... I better get a little rest, for once...) Controlling the nasty thoughts bubbling in her mind, Cake sank further into the cedar bath to fully enjoy it.

The luxurious sensation gave her a little peace of mind, as she was reminded of someone bizarre. "Wonder how that guy's doing..." She thought of the introverted middle-aged man from Stage One and chuckled. He was entertaining just to watch. "Well, guess he's alive if he's lucky... Dead if he's not." Even as Cake muttered that to herself, she couldn't help but remember the man's eyes lit with genuine concern for her. Cake plunged her face halfway into the bath. "Ugh, come on! Why do I have to remember that dingy little dude when I'm taking a nice bath!? Beat it, dumbass!" With a violent splash, Cake rested the back of her head onto the edge of the cedar tub, and floated on the surface. Now she was thinking of the pitch-black figure who brought about all this change. "The Demon Lord... I thought he only existed in myths and fairy tales..." What more could she say about him than he was unbelievable. (I've gotta light a fire under that monster's ass, somehow... Doesn't seem like he'd fall for any *femme fatale* crap. What is he in it for? Those flowers in the sky, though...) For the first time in a while, Cake had the luxury of thinking of trivial

thoughts. Perhaps it was in the nature of a nice, hot bath.

As Cake spent a moment in bliss, another girl was grumpily gazing up at the sky. “C’mon!” she whined. It was Akane, hiding somewhere in Hellion territory. She watched the fireworks burn in the sky and fade away, one after another. “When I’m not around, you guys go and do something cool! That’s what I’m talking about, Hakuto!” She stomped the ground, visibly upset at being left out. “Just you watch, you’re going to be sorry when I get that big treasure!” Akane quipped and blended into the night. She herself was like a firework, appearing and vanishing into the darkness.

Invitation

——Belphegor's Castle, Hellion Territory.

A Messenger was kneeling in the throne room, making various reports. The king seemed bored by them all, his mind wandering elsewhere. "Enough. If the monkeys want to make some noise, let them be." Despite his own land being ransacked, he seemed utterly uninterested and without a shred of concern. Despite being the 'king,' he abused his freedom to the point of epitomizing Sloth.

This made things rather challenging for those reporting events to him. "B-But, they have already crossed the border, causing damage en route to Stage Two..."

The king waved the Messenger away as if he was shooing a dog and slumped into his throne with his whole body. After the Messenger left the room, silence returned to the throne room. The room was usually filled with lascivious women of various species, but the only one remaining now was the Lamia. Her upper body was that of a dangerously-shapely woman, and her lower body that of a fierce serpent. Lamia were usually highly intelligent, and were often kept for secretarial roles in Hellion territory.

"Are you sure, my King?"

"If the market gets destroyed, I'll rebuild it."

The Lamia immediately discerned from the king's short response that he was neither apathetic nor lazy. In fact, the king was highly intrigued. Most Grand Devils were self-centered, which made them straightforward in a certain way. They were honest about their own desires. "Think about it. My dear, dear, failure of a daughter is desperately trying to stick a blade into my back. What's a little commotion in the land compared to that grand occasion?"

"Yes, Your Majesty..."

"My dear daughter, who used to cry and beg, terrified of me. Her skin burnt, without a sense of taste or temperature... My dear daughter who could never grow a single horn, who finally fled into the nations of humans..." The king was exceptionally talkative, which elicited a concealed sigh from the Lamia. She

knew that once the king became engrossed in something, he couldn't be bothered with anything else. "My scared little daughter couldn't have made that decision on her own. That's where the apes come in. They have a particular hatred for me, among all of the lowly hybrids."

"The peace treaty is broken." Lamia confirmed the obvious.

"The apes will most likely make a mess all over my land. Their grudge will allow them to attack fiercely and without reservation. I will deploy my army to suppress the riots, leaving the castle defenses down. How becoming."

The Lamia couldn't tell if the king was commending his opponents or insulting them. In order to urge the king to make a decision, she spoke up. "If their path is clear, should we fortify the castle—"

"No, deploy the army as planned. However, we send them to the borders of the neighboring territories. Can't let Envy or Pride ruin the fun."

"If I may, Your Majesty, that's..." *Too convenient for the enemy*, she almost said. The king was constructing the very situation the attackers were hoping for by containing the commotion within the territory alone and diverting the army away from the capital. Belphegor's confidence was excessive, but definitely warranted. If this Grand Devil had any sort of ambition or studiousness, he would have taken rule of the entirety of Hellion territory long ago.

"She did well to choose and enlist the apes, but there is one thing..."

"What is it, Your Majesty?"

"The apes can't kill me." Belphegor had, on numerous occasions, simply walked into Animania and trampled the Anima for sport. The species who suffered the most from his hunting trips were the ape-hybrids. "My dear, careful daughter wouldn't bear her fangs against me on the backs of the weak. Now this is quite the riddle..." Belphegor leaned onto the armrest of his throne, sinking into deep contemplation. Despite his land being torn up by invaders, his thoughts were focused on solving this difficult puzzle.

Then, a sound could be heard from afar. The sound came again, followed by another. Belphegor rushed to the window and stared into the distance towards the source of the noise. "Now, this...!" He saw giant flowers glimmering in the

distant sky, and Belphegor became as immobile as a statue, wondering what they could mean. He couldn't deny how powerfully beautiful they were.

"Behold! My dear daughter is calling me! Inviting me! Ah, she's colluded with someone smarter than the apes! Drawing my attention? Impressive!" the king shouted, audibly excited. He relished the rumbling roar of the explosions. Meanwhile, the Hellions within his territory didn't share that sentiment. They were completely lost as to what the sounds meant or what kind of magic they were.

In an attempt to quell the king's excitement, the Lamia carefully asked, "Will Your Majesty travel to that land? If the Count hears word of it, he would surely have a few choice words to say about it."

The king suddenly seemed uninterested and lazily slumped back into the throne. Since his enemy was drawing his attention, it was easy to imagine that some sort of trap would await him there. Knowingly walking into a trap was no sign of bravery, but of foolishness, and the Lamia was trying to convince him of this. He was safer in the ironclad castle.

"Enough," the king said. "Send the army to stay at the borders. If we fortify the castle's defenses on top of this, my dear daughter may give up and leave." The king's words were met with a silent bow by the Lamia and she moved to leave the throne room to execute the king's orders. She seemed satisfied that he had decided against the worst-case scenario of diving straight into the enemy's trap. "Strange that she went after the Slave Market... Does she feel some sort of pity from living in the land of humans?" The king continued to mumble to himself as the Lamia closed the door on her way out. She couldn't help but let a smile show at seeing Belphegor's childish attitude. While he was a problematic king in many ways, she couldn't help but adore him.

——The vicinity of Stage Three, within Belphegor's territory.

Thick, shadowy woods and an eerie mountain range with numerous caves stretched across the land. The Demon Lord and Olgan came upon a lake of dark water and took their first break of the night. They had passed some cities along the way that seemed to differ from human cities only in their unique architecture. The Demon Lord scribbled into his notebook with great interest when observing them. His writing was all over the place, somewhere between

code and a hurriedly composed grocery list. No one could have deciphered this scrawling but him. “I see. Medium-sized monsters live in cities, but small species like goblins live in caves, while larger species live in the mountains. Devils with high status live in mansions and castles that put human nobles to shame...” As the Demon Lord mumbled to himself, an occasional gut-shaking rumble shuddered through the land. The sky brightened at each burst. The Demon Lord laughed with amusement.

“You seem awfully cheerful,” Olgan said, in a good mood herself. She floated in the air as they spoke, peering into his notebook over the Demon Lord’s shoulder.

“Fireworks are great. Has to be one of the rare things in life that never gets old.”

“Uh-huh.”

“They may be an invention that rivals historical art pieces and timeless symphonies.”

“Is that so?”

“Precisely because they only last for a moment without... Uh, hm. Right.” The Demon Lord trailed off, noticing Olgan at a suspiciously close distance.

She seemed very happy with the Devilish Horns. She took out her compact every other minute, looking at the horns in the reflection and letting out a smile or muttering something. While the Demon Lord had vaguely picked up on how much weight and reverence the horns carried for Olgan, he still struggled to see why. As it was with the Buckets he set up in the village of Rabbi, he didn’t know what to do when something of practically no value from a world of his creation was unexpectedly held in high regard here. For the same reason, when he sold the Tea Cup or Music Box to earn some cash, he was happy, but very taken aback when McDonald paid exorbitant prices for them.

(I wonder if Tron wants horns, too...?) She was a Firebrand, just like Olgan. As far as the Demon Lord could tell, Tron had no want for something like that, just an environment where she could live in peace. (I mean, she’s still a kid... Guess a child would have a different reaction than an adult if they both came across an unattainably expensive item.)

Then, Olgan peered into his face. Her eyes were tranquil, which made the Demon Lord uncomfortable, somehow. She had given the Demon Lord a cold-blooded impression initially, but now looked completely comfortable with him. “What’s wrong? No more chit-chat?”

“What’s that supposed to mean...?”

“Your stories are often confusing and unclear, but they’re like tales of a distant land. I don’t mind them. They remind me of a picture book I’d read long ago.”

“A picture book, of all things...” The first thing to come to the Demon Lord’s mind was the children’s book *The Adventures of Spot the Destroyer-Dog* that Aku had once shown him. That was the last kind of medium he wanted to have his utterances categorized as.

“I want to ask you something, Demon Lord.”

“Hm...?”

“What sort of relationship do you have with the one in the Divine Realm?”

(Divine Realm? That shrine...?) They had no relationship, as far as the Demon Lord knew. He had only ever heard her speak, and had barely gotten a glimpse of her. “None.” What else could he have said?

“Not sure I believe you. She vouched for you and mobilized the apes. There must be some sort of relationship there.”

“I don’t even know if that was a she... It sounds like *you* know who she is, though.” While he recalled that the voice was vaguely feminine, he could hardly be sure without seeing her.

Olgan inquisitively stared at the Demon Lord’s face for a while, before reluctantly answering. “She is a mystical fox who has defended Animania since the days of old. She has also been called the Primal Beast.”

“Primal Beast? Sounds anime.”

“Ani...me? Anyway, it’s been said that she created the Divine Realm, a barrier, to protect her country. The Anima worship her like a goddess.”

“A barrier? That place was totally broken into...” The Demon Lord chuckled,

recalling how the devil called Kale had intruded upon their realm. The ‘Primal Beast’ could barely move, let alone protect the place.

“That’s true. I’ve heard that lately—over the past few centuries, I mean—the barrier has been gradually weakening.”

“I see. I think I have a grasp on things... But my answer doesn’t change.” The Demon Lord had only stumbled upon the place. The only thing he remembered doing was kicking, slapping, and mocking that Kale brat. He practically considered it a drive-by.

“Are you sure about that? Her children were quite fond of you, too. No, let me be blunt. Are you their father?”

“As if! I told you, I’m single and free!” The Demon Lord mumbled some curses and lit his cigarette. In fact, Hakuto Kunai was 45, well old enough to have been married.

“Then look into my eyes and tell me you’re not their father.”

“How badly do you want to make me out to be a married man?”

“No, wait. Look into my horns.” Olgan carefully pulled her hood back. She was blushing, for some reason, and looked rather embarrassed.

“Why do I have to defend myself against some stupid accusation? Staring at a pair of horns, no less...!”

“You can’t do it? You admit, then? Admit it.”

Olgan’s inquisition was interrupted by a quiet voice. “We meet again at last, Dragon...”

The two turned to find a bat hanging from a tree branch, and Olgan jumped in front of the Demon Lord as if to protect him. Countless more bats converged upon the tree, pressing together and forming a silhouette that shifted into a devil.

“I wanted to do this sooner, but the territory was a little too crowded up until now...”

(That’s...) The Demon Lord silently groaned, seeing the devil that materialized. It was the high-ranking devil Allit, whom Zero had fought in the Holy City. His

appearance was as princely as ever, good-looking enough for even men to stare. At the same time, the Demon Lord felt a strong heartbeat, as if a second heart in his chest had just woken up.

Olgan stared the devil down, visibly on alert. "Duke of Darkness... What do you want?"

"What do I want...?" Allit closed his eyes and put on a thin smile. There was something else. "This is a trivial matter, but I recalled that the woman with the armor of the Holy element was your partner."

"Mynk? Hate to break it to you, but she's not here."

"May I ask you to pass on an apology then?" Allit said, keeping his eyes closed. "...For playing with her until she broke."

Olgan's expression turned savage. "You...!"

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord took a long drag from his cigarette, trying his best to remain calm. Ever since he laid eyes on this devil, some unknown sensation had been curdling in the pit of his stomach, accelerating his heart even more. (The hell...!?) It was glee. A raging, violent glee. The Demon Lord quietly turned his back and watched the dark, quiet water of the lake as he listened to the conversation behind them.

"You want to get to Mynk, you get through me," Olgan declared.

"You're mistaken," Allit countered. "I have no desire to go anywhere near that bizarre, bipedal ant. Besides, a filthy mixed-blood like you... Oh?" Allit's crimson eyes lit up with shock. Olgan audibly gulped, as tension thickened in the air.

"Astonishing. A firebrand with horns...?" Allit glanced at the Demon Lord's back and gracefully nodded, as if he was assured of something. "I apologize for that comment. Apparently, you have become one of us." Allit apologized genuinely, with a hand on his chest. He had no idea how, but Olgan's head now had a bona-fide pair of horns on it. There was no way that Allit could dare insult her nature any longer. Mocking a devil's horns was akin to spitting on his own face. "In fact, they are gorgeous... Not only do they exude unapproachability, but a powerful force like that reminds me of a Salamander."

"Hmph..." Olgan attempted to maintain her stern expression, but she couldn't

help curling the corner of her lips at the no-strings-attached compliment from Allit, widely known as the Duke of Darkness. If he had seen her this way, she must appear as a threat to other Hellions, too.

“I have yet another question to ask you... Dragon?”

“Dragon?” Olgan couldn’t register that the Demon Lord was being addressed as ‘Dragon,’ since the two were so unrelated.

(Dammit! What the hell is this...!?) The Demon Lord continued dragging from the cigarette in his mouth without a word. Ordinarily, this would have helped clear his mind and calm his nerves. (This thing isn’t letting up...) The riotous sensation began to shake his hand and the cigarette in it. Fearing that he might lose control, the Demon Lord finally turned to the devil. “You have something to do with me, then? Let’s find a proper place to talk.”

“Oh, I expected a little more resistance... Gutsy. Allow me to invite you to my humble manor.”

The Demon Lord nodded and tossed the cigarette into his portable ashtray. He preferred going anywhere else over having the devil say something he didn’t want Olgan to hear.

Of course, Olgan saw nothing but red flags. “Talk to me for a minute, Demon Lord. Following him back to his lair? That’s suicide.”

“Don’t worry about it. You head to the castle, as planned. Akane *will* make contact... She should, especially to find out why I’m not with you. Wait for me with her.” The Demon Lord walked over to Allit. He heard Olgan say something as he did, but he couldn’t understand it. His heart only thumped louder, his vision going red... As if he was anticipating the bell in the ring.

“I’ve been waiting for this day... It is a pleasant surprise that *you* shared the sentiment.”

“Are we going or not?”

“Pardon me. What an honor to welcome the Dragon to my manor...”

Numerous black rose petals appeared around Allit’s feet, each morphing into a bat. A swirl of bats rose and engulfed the two, and they disappeared.

Left alone, Olgan was fuming. “What is he thinking, following the Duke of Darkness into his manor...!?” It was obviously a trap, but the Demon Lord wasn’t the type to heed unsolicited advice. Olgan thought that she had given him various warnings and explanations about things over the course of their journey together, but the Demon Lord never deviated from acting exactly according to his instincts. He never cared what others thought, and trampled over anything in his path, trap or not, without hesitation. It was very reminiscent of the mythical rebel, who fought against the heavens until he was exiled.

(I could never be like that, no matter how powerful I become...) Olgan couldn’t help but compare his lifestyle to her own. She had concealed her true race with numerous magical items for so long, blending into human society. Her life was lived on the run, fearing her father’s assailants. Even when she had risen through the ranks of adventurers to the summit of S-Rank, even earning the title of Star Player, her life itself hadn’t changed. She always feared the shadow around the corner, avoiding any unnecessary contact with others to protect her identity and traveling from one city to another, always making sure not to remain in the same place.

(Of course, nothing changed. I never tried to fight the root of the problem and only ran away...) She had always turned her back on unfavorable fights and reality, giving herself the excuse that she had ‘grown stronger than before.’ There was no way that this would ever yield the change she longed for. (But not anymore...) There had been an unmistakable change within her. A roar could be heard in the distance, and a faint light illuminated the dark lake for a moment. Seeing herself in the reflection, Olgan regained some confidence. She saw no Firebrand there, but a bona-fide devil, ominous horns and all. (There’s no more ‘someday’... Today’s when I turn it around!) With steadfast resolve, Olgan flew straight towards the castle. A staccato of explosions echoed through the night sky, occasionally lighting it up like bursts of sunshine.

——Allit’s manor, Hellion Territory.

In a thicket of dark forest near the Divine Realm stood Allit’s manor, quietly looming. The forest let in very little light, even during the day, and not even the simplest of Hellbeasts dared to approach it. It was instilled into their bones how

much of a terrifying existence the master of the manor was.

(Hmph. This is practically Quick Travel...) The Demon Lord opened his eyes to find himself in an elegant garden. Despite the time of night, the area was lit up with garden lamps of Light Spell Stones, some of them glowing with red or blue light. They weren't glamorous like Christmas lights, but rather mystical and tranquil.

"I would love to offer you a glass of wine... Will you remain as you are?"

"As I am...?"

"No implications. You are horribly calm as you are, but I prefer the *rugged* you." Allit turned to the table set up in the garden and grabbed the bottle of wine before pouring a glass. He filled it about a third of the way up, twirling the glass throughout. His demeanor, as well as the dining ware and décor, exuded elegance.

Truth be told, the Demon Lord was intimidated. (Well this guy's hoity-toity...) Akira Ono disliked any kind of uptight individual or environment. He could already tell that all of Allit's décor and fixtures were highly expensive, which would distract him from simply enjoying a drink. (It's all well put-together, I'll give him that...) The Demon Lord couldn't help but be impressed by that point, at least. The extravagant wooden table, the ornately decorated chairs, the obviously rare wine, and exquisite glasses... the entirety of the garden seemed to fit the devil before him like obedient servants.

Allit sat on a chair and crossed his legs. "I do have a few questions for you..." he began, savoring the aroma of his glass of wine, swirling it. This devil made the most pretentious of scenes picturesque. "Most of all, your intentions for calling yourself the Demon Lord at one time and the Dragonborn at another."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." The Demon Lord brazenly threw himself down onto the other chair and crossed his legs before lighting another cigarette. The rapid beating of his heart had subsided at some point.

"No need to maintain the pretense here. The powerful tend to come in many forms... Not that any of them can switch between entire lives like you do." Allit, for example, changed his form as needed between his vampire-like form, the flying form of a giant bat, and the form of a pitch-black Hellbeast meant for

charging. In that sense, he understood what it was like to change one's appearance for the occasion.

"I am nothing but myself. I don't know what you mean." Still dodging the question, the Demon Lord Taste Tested the glass in his hand. White light emanated from it, indicating that no poison was in the liquid.

"My bloodline can be traced back to the Original, which is rare for vampires. It makes me particularly sensitive to scents and energy. Moreover, you have the same color as the dragon."

"Color...?" the Demon Lord repeated, recognizing that phrase. Tron had said something like that once.

"On rare occasions, I can't help but obtain some of the powers of those I feed on. I would describe it as second-rate imitation, though. Not all of their powers carry over."

The Demon Lord recalled how Tron had described her power: seeing the color of one's soul and reading their emotions and thoughts from that color. He tossed the glass of wine Allit had poured him down his throat, growing more reckless. "So? What if we do have the same color?" Audaciously, the Demon Lord reached for the bottle and poured himself another glass. He did remember how Allit had fed on Tron's blood during the battle in the Holy City. Apparently, there was no way of getting out of this one. He rolled the second glass of wine over his tongue and defiantly puffed a cloud of white smoke.

"Allow me to present my hypothesis... You are the other Dragonborn, ordered in secret by the Dragon to gather information on neighboring nations."

"Other, huh...?" The Demon Lord exhaled more smoke without much of an expression. He considered Zero no more than a *bosozoku*, let alone a Dragonborn.

"You go around eliminating any Hellions you come across, while calling yourself the Demon Lord in another form to sow seeds of doubt among us, in order to divide our race. Many still long for the return of Lucifer." Just as Allit had pointed out, the Demon Lord had fought off the Satanists, and destroyed any devils that appeared in his path. If anyone called the Demon Lord kept doing such actions, it was only natural that he would be the cause for much

commotion within Hellion territory. “Greole, too, I assume. It seems you played with Kale the other day... And with Utopia through the Satanists before that. I don’t know what to think of your taste, Dragon...” Allit wore a slim grin, sipping on his wine. He almost wanted to applaud his guest for tormenting the two devils whom he considered to be *off leash* and driving him insane. The devils seemed to live on a delicate power balance.

“That’s enough yapping... What do you want?” the Demon Lord asked, puffing out smoke and glancing over at the garden. He didn’t understand any of what the devil was saying, nor did he really want to.

“The Dragon, employing the façade of Lucifer, is trying to build divides among Hellions. Not to mention befriend humans, of all species. Armageddon is nigh. Your actions speak that louder than any words could.”

(Armageddon...!?)

“The Demon Lord, or Lucifer, if you prefer, has brought humans, Firebrands, and even Anima in tow, ready to strike down one of the Original Sins. If you succeed, Hellion territory will fall into unprecedented chaos.” Allit’s assessment was accurate, down to his prediction. No one was supposed to be able to easily take out a Grand Devil, and if such a person called himself the Demon Lord, it would only fuel the fires of chaos.

“Your hypothesis aside, Armageddon never happened.”

“How interesting... Past tense?”

“Just so you know, in 1999—” the Demon Lord cut himself short, realizing that the historical event in real life had nothing to do with this fantasy world. Despite his logical hesitation, flashbacks flooded his brain. Black rain falling from a pitch-black sky. The countless holes in the ground. Human-shaped silhouettes falling into the hills. Crumbling skyscrapers, wreckage of what used to be cities, filled with rotten corpses. “Just... It was all a lie... Nothing about it was real,” he muttered. As if to defy his claim, a raindrop fell on his hand. Then another drop, then another, until rain began wetting his hair and shoulders. The Demon Lord’s expression shifted. “Why is it raining now...?”

“My, my. You don’t look too well. Unpleasant memories associated with rain...?”

“Rain...”

“Now... That’s a look I wanted to put on your face.” Allit’s eyes gradually became black, and slowly began to glow crimson. Those eyes belonged to a vampire who had just spotted prey. “It seems I was carried away in conversation. Let’s cut to the chase... My hypothesis will scatter to the wind if I kill you here and now.”

“Come and try it.” The Demon Lord broke character as silver light burst out of his body. His soul demanded the shift, without him selecting Change Character.

Silent rain fell on the dignified garden. One of them moved first, their foot sending the table flying into the air, the expensive dining ware and decor along with it. At the same time, their fists passed each other. They both twisted their heads to dodge the punch, and immediately turned to kick, clashing mid-air. The impact blew both of them away.

“You look so much better now... Dragon.”

The Demon Lord had already transformed into the *bosozoku* with a giant silver dragon on his back. The Dragonborn laughed, overcome with exhilaration. Whether it was Zero or Akira who laughed was another topic for debate. “What a day...! Never thought anyone would invite me back to a party!” His heart was surging, his gloomy mood having dissipated. Zero cracked his knuckles and flashed a savage grin at Allit. Hot blue flames rose from his body, indicating that Grudge and Mad Flurry had been activated. “You want a revenge match? Bring it on.”

“Yes. Just imagining bathing in your blood fills me with excitement. For the first time in centuries.” With an elegant wave of the hand, Allit materialized three Dark Spheres in the air. They flew at Zero with astonishing speed, but he dodged the first sphere, deflected the second with his fist, and kicked the third sphere right back at Allit.

The devil chuckled and spread his wings, soaring into the air. “Your style is as unconventional as always... Sleep. Charm.” Firing off spells that inflicted status conditions, Allit glided through the air approaching Zero from behind, moving in for a chop.

“You’re the one flying in a fist fight. Talk about unconventional...!” Zero

dodged Allit's blow without even turning around and lowered his center of gravity. Allit's expression twisted. Whether it was a second or only a half a second, it was a devastating opening.

"First Skill — Kung Fu." Zero's fists roared, unleashing a stream of one, two, three, fifty, one hundred punches... Allit evaded them all, deflecting some in the process, waiting for an opening. But the attacks never let up. "Second Skill — Close Combat." Kicks were now mixed into the storm of strikes.

Allit couldn't help but laugh in the midst of this dire predicament. (Your physical strength is truly astonishing...) While the devil was just barely avoiding such lethal damage, he was taking more and more hits, causing his body to ache all over.

Since the combat design in the game was to activate a chain of skills, it was difficult to escape an attack once the process had started. Not to mention that Zero's speed reached 88 while Mad Flurry was activated. Considering that Greole, the infamous King of Devils, had a speed of 66, Zero's speed was otherworldly.

In contrast to Allit, who could only laugh at how ridiculously strong Zero was, Zero's expression grew more and more clouded. "You..." he snarled, and finally ceased his barrage of attacks, staring into Allit's eyes. A little taken aback by this sudden turn of events, Allit made some distance between them in preparation for the next attack. "Lot stronger than you were last time. Faster, too."

"My powers were restricted by two factors last time." Allit recalled the Holy Castle within the Holy City, protected by the barrier of the Wise Angel, which had drastically lowered Allit's powers. Since that was also a Double, it was akin to Allit fighting a boxing match while handcuffed. Still, if it wasn't for the interruption of the Dragonborn, Allit would have dealt catastrophic damage to the Holy City.

"Then forget about it," Zero sighed, terribly disappointed.

"Don't be silly. You're going to die now, Dragon! Dread Node." A pitch-black rapier materialized in Allit's hand, the tip pointed in Zero's direction.

Zero dodged Allit's lightning-fast thrusts by leaping backwards, before stepping forward back into range and unleashing a round-house kick at blinding

speed.

“Combat Skill: Storm Blow!” (Boost Attack damage by the number of the enemy’s kills, up to 50.)

“Grr...!” Allit managed to put his sword in between himself and the kick, but was still blown away. Just as he poised himself to make another attack, one of his knees buckled. While he had blocked the attack itself, the damage generated by Zero’s skill had penetrated his defense.

“I knew it,” Zero said. “You’re not healed from last time. No way you took my Do or Die and walked away in one piece.”

“Shut up...”

“I’m happy to take any challenges for a revenge match... But heal yourself up, first, y’know? I want my one-on-ones to be pure, not beating up someone who’s already hurt.”

“Prideful as always, Dragon... I hate that about you...!” Allit rose to his feet, and Zero cast him a pout and a glare. Beating up an injured opponent was never something that Zero would be proud of. In fact, that would make him decidedly lame. Only losers didn’t look for a fair fight. “Dragon, you die the most gruesome death imaginable... I will drink your blood dry, skin you, and hang you up on my wall.”

“Getting a little creepy, Vampire.”

“Please, stop!” a voice shouted, which caught Zero’s attention.

He turned to find a girl wearing a French maid’s outfit, for some reason. He noticed that her face and parts of her body were crystallized. “Eesh, now an audience...?” Zero complained, but his expression grew more excited. Besides, it seemed like the girl was afflicted by some sort of curse. “Hey, Vampire. What’d you do to that girl?” he asked, gleefully cracking his knuckles. He had found a reason to get back into this fight.

“What are you doing to Master!? You bully!”

“Huh...?” Zero froze, realizing that the girl was blaming him. He had never expected that response, and he had never been the ‘bad guy’ in a fight before.

“W-Wait, I’m...”

“What are you doing here...!? Get back to the manor!”

“No! I can’t just watch that bad man hurt you, Master...!”

Zero’s vision blurred. Even in the game, the crowd had always been on his side. Any one-on-one was accompanied by one-sided cheers for Zero. For years, he had only gone after serial player killers. The crowd saw him as a sort of special event, too. In fact, the players’ opinion on Zero’s strength was middle-of-the-road at best, which may have still been generous considering how strictly Zero stuck to roleplaying. Zero’s skills, Grudge and Mad Flurry, had to be set against targets of up to three teams at a time, and could only be changed up to three times in a day. In its later years, the game hosted players from all around the world, in the order of hundreds to thousands of teams. He was so limited in whom he could be effective against. Zero had garnered a reputation of being extremely effective against a selective few, but useless against anyone else. It might have been worth mentioning that since Zero had a Grudge set for Satanists and Hellions at the moment, considering how many Satanists and Hellions there were out there, the scope of his targets was extremely vast. For example, if he set a Grudge against Holylight, the effect of the skill would reach everyone in the country, making the effect broken in this fantasy world.

“I’m... the bad guy...?” Zero, meanwhile, had his jaw on the floor. He could hear his identity crumbling to the ground.

“Master is hurt... What are you doing here!? Get out!”

Watching the girl cry, Zero finally turned around and ran. He saw no other option.

“W-Wait, Dragon...! Our fight isn’t over!” Allit swung Dread Node to take a piece of fabric off of Zero’s shoulder, but Zero didn’t even seem to notice. He kept running until he disappeared from their sight. Only the dumbfounded Allit and the crying girl were left alone in the rain. They stood there for some time.

“You...! What have you done!?” Allit raged at the girl, who only kept crying tears into the garden soil.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry... Please don’t be mad...”

Allit shook his fists and gazed up at the sky at the ridiculous turn of events. He hadn't really grasped the situation. He would probably never understand why the Dragonborn fled in such a pathetic fashion. That Zero lost sight of his identity just because an onlooker girl called him 'bad' was hardly believable. (Did she do this? Or did the rain... Maybe he reacted to the Still Angel's curse... Dammit, there's no way of knowing!)

Then, Allit noticed a small trace of blood on his rapier. His expression softened from utter frustration to glee. "Oh...!" Without even spending a second to enjoy its aroma, Allit licked the blade and wrapped his mouth around it. He didn't want the increasing downpour to wash anything away.

"Master...? Are you okay...?"

"F-Ha ha ha... Ha ha ha...!" Allit gazed upward, cackling. The girl watched, frozen. She had never seen her master laugh like this in all the years she spent in the manor. "This healing... I feel heat all over... It's *hot* , ha ha ha ha!" In the matter of moments, Allit was healed of the damage for his obliterated Double, and the damage he took during their fight. In fact, he felt unparalleled exhilaration coursing through him. "Dragon... Yes, I have taken in dragon's blood...!"

The only effect the girl could see on her master was that he was incredibly happy, now. "Master..."

"Hmph," Allit sarcastically scoffed at the girl staring at the ground. Her interruption had gained him dragon's blood, after all. He wouldn't further embarrass himself by scolding the girl, despite having been unprepared himself. "I will not punish you for this," he said in a calm tone. "There won't be a next time."

"Y-Yes, Master! Oh, let me fetch you an umbrella—"

"No need." Allit brushed some heavier raindrops off of him and looked up at the sky from the entrance to his manor. He felt powerful hunger and thirst. (With just a drop, I've... I want his blood... His eyes, his skin, his bones... I want every part of that man...!) Allit was surprised to find how excited he was from merely imagining what he could do to the Dragonborn. The centuries and millennia of boredom that preceded this night seemed insignificant now. The

world had changed, as if it had been given a fresh coat of paint. (Dragon... I'm coming for you. I will rob you of everything...!)

The girl nervously watched Allit quiver in excitement. No one knew yet what curdled in his heart.

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord had gotten some distance away from Allit's manor, and had found cover from the rain under a large tree. Frustrated, he lit a cigarette. "That moron. Made a big mess, then took off and ran..." It was like a Power Ranger running away from the scene because a bystander had thrown a stone at him. That might have been a comical incident, but the Demon Lord remained unhappy. The rain showed no sign of stopping. "Why does it have to rain here...? I miss the village of Rabbi." He heard no noise around him, save for the insistent downpour.

The rain brought horrible memories with it. The steady fall of raindrops reminded him of the sound of fingers typing on keyboards.

You always look for the future and erase the past.

Time waits for no one. What can we do but keep moving on into the future? The past erases itself, and we can't do anything about it.

Do you really think so? Time won't erase our memories.

Type type type type. The chatroom symphony.

Type type type type. The keyboard sang.

Something about the letters on the screen didn't seem right, But he couldn't place his finger on it. The electronic conversation continued.

Memories are shared by those who've lived them. They're a treasure that is never lost.

Not to play devil's advocate, but... If everyone who lived an event dies, did the event ever happen at all?

Type type type type. The chatroom symphony.

Type type type type. The keyboard sang.

Are you afraid to lean on vague memories? Are you afraid of people forgetting

you? Are you afraid that, one day, no one will remember...? That you would have never existed?

I... Don't understand what you're saying.

“That’s why you cling to the past, so desperate to get it back...”

The Demon Lord snapped out of it. He frantically looked to and fro, but found no one around him. Only the rain continued to fall from the sky, soaking the ground below.

“How long’s this going to last?” The Demon Lord exhaled smoke in irritation before tossing the cigarette in his ashtray. Soon, having decided that staying still was worse than not, the Demon Lord began running through the pouring rain.

Father and Daughter

Olgan stood gazing up at the imposing castle, soaked by the falling rain. She felt nothing towards this place other than sorrow and misery. While the castle already loomed over any who beheld it, Olgan knew full well how vast the unseen portions of the castle were, expanding underground for over fifty stories. The workforce that dug the expansive catacombs was mostly comprised of Kobolds, but included a significant number of enslaved Anima who were forcibly put to labor. Dwarves, who were highly skilled with their hands, were prime targets for this sentence. No prisoner had ever returned to their home.

(What did I used to think, watching them as a child...?) The slaves were put to heavy labor with meager food, miserable conditions, and no forms of entertainment or free time. Even the strong bond among the Anima crumbled at the endless days of hopelessness, as they always began to turn on each other. Those who shouted in protest, those who fought back, and those who cried... They all fell one by one. If they didn't come to by morning, they never did. (Didn't I use them to make me feel better about my own situation...?) Those under trying circumstances tended to look for those in worse conditions, and there was always someone who had it worse. Olgan used to peer into the dark tunnel, watch the silhouettes move, and told herself that she at least had it better than them, justifying her situation in the process. (I always found an excuse to stay, and nothing changed from it...) Changing one's environment requires great strength and a brave decision.

"Why the long face, Red Riding Hood?"

"It's you..." Olgan looked towards the source of the cheerful voice to find Akane.

After a beat, Mynk appeared, hip-hopping "Where were you, Olgan!? Do you know how long I was looking for you!?" Mynk demanded, still bouncing on her Moon Shoes.

"You're always up to shenanigans." Olgan thought that she had gotten used to Mynk's bizarre actions, but this was on another level. She let out a quiet laugh. "Forget another level... You were always on another plane than me."

“Olgan...?” Just as Mynk was left confused by her reaction, a revelation hit her. Olgan had clearly changed. “You’re...”

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep them hidden when we’re among humans.” Olgan said, before Mynk had a chance to ask. She did have a magical item to conceal and camouflage the aura of her Hellion blood.

“Hey, hey. Where’s Hakuto? Of course he goes and does fireworks when I’m not around. I bet he’s scheming somewhere again...”

“Scheming, huh...? Now, how to put this...” Olgan frowned, recalling the Demon Lord’s lackluster actions, then his relationship with the dragon whom the Anima called Great Mother, the words of the Great Priestess, the seemingly random clash with the ape-hybrids that turned into invading Hellion territory, the night of drinking with the Dwarf and his group of Anima, as well as the interactions with the princess of Palma and the Duke of Darkness.

(I was just drifting along like a log in the current...) At no point had Olgan taken any initiative. The Demon Lord had initiated, taken action, and spoken out time and time again. (And each time he did, our situation kept changing...) And change it did, suddenly and rapidly. Before she knew it, the Demon Lord was laughing and drinking with the dwarf, who never hid his animosity. He had even roped in the ape-hybrids whom he had *fought against*. Now the apes were on his side, tearing up Hellion territory. To top it all off, the Great Priestess had all but encouraged such actions. Olgan felt like she had been put under a spell.

“Gotta keep your guard up, you know?” Akane called. “Every little thing Hakuto says or does moves along some kind of scheme or another. How can you deal with that?” Akane’s words carried a kernel of truth. Of course, none of the Demon Lord’s actions were ever premeditated, but Olgan couldn’t help but read into his actions after everything that had happened. “Well, thanks to Hakuto, we got here easy breezy. Didn’t have to make any pit stops.” Just as Akane cracked a grin, an explosion could be heard in the distance, slightly lighting up the area. It seems the apes were hard at work causing a distraction. “I’d love to stay for tea, but I can’t. I’m going to go hunt for treasure. You two wait for Hakuto to come back.”

“Y-You’re sure you can go alone?” Olgan asked.

“There won’t be any loot left if you keep waiting for orders. When you play against Hakuto, you have to move a couple steps ahead and take him by surprise.” With a wink, Akane ran off towards the castle.

Olgan and Mynk watched her speed away.

“I’m impressed you rode that storm this far...” Olgan said.

“You have no idea... You owe me one, Olgan,” Mynk said, despite continuing to happily bounce along.

Olgan consciously refrained from drawing attention to the bouncing, when Xiaoshou and Monkey Magic appeared, panting.

“Where is that false god...?”

“Who knows? Probably having a drink,” Olgan dismissed, recalling the night in the cabin. She might have had a different reaction if she knew that the Demon Lord was, in fact, drinking wine.

“Tell that false god that we’re the ones who serve the Great Mother. You guys can back off now.” Monkey Magic’s demand was met by Olgan turning her head away in silence. The ape glared at her for a while before turning to Mynk beside her. “Human, you better... Ooh-ah?”

“Wh-What!? You don’t have to tell me twice to get out of here!” Mynk bounced high into the air, visibly on alert.

The leader of the apes watched her bounce up and down. It looked rather rhythmic and fun. “Human, what’s with your feet... Shoes?”

“We don’t have time to deal with some deer-hybrid,” said Xiaoshou.

“Who’re you calling a deer!? I’m a human!” Mynk protested.

Monkey Magic reluctantly turned to the castle. Their distraction wouldn’t last much longer. Besides, for whatever reason, the castle gate was open.

“Whatever! Tell the false god that we’re stealing the thunder!”

“Geh heh heh heh! I’m going to be the first one in!”

“H-Hey! I’m going to be the first one in, Baldibald!”

“It’s Xiaoshou!”

The pair ran off through the castle gate, followed by a horde of ape-hybrids that appeared out of nowhere. There were easily 500 apes in all.

“What should we do, Olgan? The gate’s open and there are no monsters. Something’s wrong.”

“It shouldn’t have been this easy to even get close to the castle.” Belphegor’s army was stationed at the border, while other monsters were running all over the territory after the distraction operation. Whatever Belphegor’s intentions were, they couldn’t deny that this was an opportunity too good to pass up. “My only concern is Count Impaler...” Woe shaded Olgan’s expression as she recalled her father’s long-serving right-hand devil. She wasn’t sure if she could kill the Count off entirely, even if she pulled out every trick up her sleeve.

“Is that the Living Dead with a spear? The one that sounds really condescending?”

“That’s right... Did you encounter him?”

“Akane took him out. She’s just as ridiculous as the Demon Lord.”

Olgan couldn’t have been happier. Even if Akane had only taken out a Double, the damage would have affected the Count’s core. Not even he would recover quickly from such a blow. “We won’t have this chance again. We can’t let it slip.”

“Give me a break...” Mynk whined. “The Demon Lord *and* Akane are going in, on top of all of those Anima. What are we going to add to the mix?”

“If I don’t go, nothing will change. I won’t even get to change. If I don’t... I’ll be stuck here forever. Mynk, you can head back to town—”

“I’ll come too...” Mynk sighed. “I’ve followed you far enough. But as soon as things get hot, I’m getting out of Dodge with these shoes.”

“What now? You’re pretending that a Griffin or something’s sealed in the soles of those weird shoes?”

“No! These shoes, I’ll have you know...”

The pair ensued their bickering as they headed towards the castle. The wide-open gate awaited them as if it was the gaping jowl of a carnivore.

Once inside, they found countless corpses of monsters strewn throughout the ballroom.

“Did those apes do all of this...?”

“They are formidable. I watched them fight in the Slave Market, and they dominated.” Each ape-hybrid could easily take on five human soldiers. One could only imagine a horde of 3000. What’s more, the apes were even more powerful in numbers, as if their strength was boosted by a modifier. They could go toe-to-toe with an army of 30,000 humans. “And that’s only one of the Animania. The fact that there are eleven more of them is nightmarish.”

“Hey, Olgan... You don’t think the apes will *cross over* , do you?”

Cross over into human territories, she meant. The Anima reserved their strength and kept quiet, waiting for conflict to erupt within Hellion territory, but there was no telling when they would bare their deadly fangs against the humans.

“We’ll see. It all depends on him, I suppose.”

“Him...? The Demon Lord? They were calling him a false god, or something...”

“A false god... That’s one way of putting it.” Olgan couldn’t argue with that. The horns on her head were a testament to his nature.

“Now something has to be done about that Demon Lord hogging all the cool monikers.”

“Cool...?” Olgan stepped farther into the castle and found only corpses, no ape-hybrids.

The only soul alive was a kappa in distress. “Geh heh! What kind of castle is this...? It’s all empty.”

“The castle up here is just a façade. Its heart is underground.”

“Underground...? Do Grand Devils have some mole-like qualities?”

“I don’t know what they’re like,” Olgan answered. “But many devils have underground bunkers for their safety.”

“Now that’s a good tip. I better go talk to the leader.” Slapping the dish on his

head, the kappa ran off.

Olgan observed the interior of the once-familiar castle with mixed emotions. “Empty, huh...? He’s right. There’s nothing here.”

“Olgan, I understand how you feel, but... Be careful, okay?” Mynk feebly said, knowing Olgan’s circumstance full well. In fact, she had fought Belphegor’s attackers alongside Olgan before, and knew how formidable they were.

“I found the hidden staircase that’ll take us underground, geh heh heh!”

“Atta boy! You’re on a roll, today!”

“I got a lot of smarts up here.” The kappa tapped his dish with a finger, beaming with pride. Truth be told, the staircase was hardly hidden, and had been pretty much built in plain sight.

As the ape-hybrids gathered and descended underground, Olgan headed to an entirely separate room and pointed at a mirror. “Mynk, we’re taking another route underground.”

“What is this thing!? It creeps me out!” Mynk jumped, seeing the floor-length mirror with a blob of silver slime around it. She could tell that the mirror was cursed right away, and instinctively raised her staff.

“Wait, don’t smash it. The slime will go berserk if you break the mirror. It’s something my father found. Only two of them in existence.”

“So it’s a dangerous monster, then!”

“We can use it no problem. Hey,” Olgan turned to the mirror. “Take us underground. Fortieth or so.” She took a step, ready to walk through the mirror.

Mynk grabbed Olgan by the arms and dragged her backward, out of the room. “Walk *into* the mirror, are you insane!? My right eye rejects it!”

“Your ‘right eye’ again... Wait! Stop bouncing! Can’t you just walk!”

“I would love to, but I can’t make it stop!”

“Then take them off!”

“Impossible. This is the Dark Opera with the air, my third form. These shoes have already synced up to my— Don’t just yank them off of me!” Hopping

away, they entered the mirror. Silence returned to the halls as the first floor became detached from the commotion that would ensue underground.

After some time, a man entered the room, prompting a change in the mirror. A line of text appeared on its surface.

Welcome home, Creator. The mechanical line of text faded in a flash as the next line appeared. *Change current settings? YES / NO* . After that, the mirror became still again.

—B38, beneath the castle.

Olgan and Mynk were walking through the soulless underground passage. Despite the fact that they were underground, the place was lit up as much as an above-ground room was during the day, owing to the liberal use of Light Spell Stones. It was hard to imagine how a passage this far down was so wide with a ceiling this tall.

“This place is crazy... I wonder how long it took to build,” Mynk muttered, albeit with a bored expression. They hadn’t encountered a single monster so far. They had passed a few corpses along the way, but most of them were isolated. “Kind of like a dungeon. In terms of depth, it would be close to the E-Rank Blue Bricks.”

“Right.” Olgan answered, her expression more pained than Mynk’s. She knew extremely well how much blood and tears were shed to build this place. The underground labyrinth they were traversing now was much more expansive and deep than Olgan had remembered. (I wonder how many Anima lost their lives... I’m sure some of the slaves were humans, too. Not that I could afford to pity any of them back in the day.) It seemed like the passage, its walls and its ceiling, were all paved with blood. Olgan saw countless faces appearing on the walls, all screaming in lament. (I won’t ask for your forgiveness... But I will kill him.) As Olgan renewed her resolve and continued further underground, a large cry was heard, followed by screaming and the clashing of swords. Apparently, some large-scale combat was taking place on this floor. The pair rushed towards the noise.

“*Fu fu fu*... Finally, some monsters. I thought they all fled in fear of my... darkness...” Mynk was at a loss for words upon witnessing the carnage. There

were countless bodies strewn about, spread throughout a room that seemed far too large to be underground. All of the bodies belonged to ape-hybrids. Some seemed beaten to death, others had body parts melted away, and more still were as thin as a tree branch, having been crushed.

“This is what happens when the mirror breaks.”

“That slime...”

The two watched the steel-colored slime flying around the room. It stomped the apes flat, spewing out mucus to stop them in their tracks, and even swallowing them whole or melting them. The slime was a brutal force.

“Boss! Magic don’t work on this thing!”

“No good slicing or smashing it either! Nothing!”

The slime simply stuck back together after being cut, and hitting the slime only momentarily dented its surface in, dealing no damage. To boot, it even resisted magic.

The leader of the apes shouted, with a desperate expression. “Get away, everybody! I’ll get it with my Jingu Bang!” At each hit of Jingu Bang, the slime slightly slid backwards. The staff’s penetration damage seemed effective, even against this slime.

The silver slime shifted, locking onto Monkey Magic. It seemed to recognize the leader of the apes as an enemy. The slime changed its shape into what appeared to be a wave, as if it was trying to swallow the ape whole.

Seeing the change, Olgan immediately went to fire off a powerful spell. “Back off, Anima... **Diamond Dust**.” An incredible burst of cold erupted from the magic circle that Olgan created, blanketing the room in shimmering silver. The ice attack immediately crystallized the slime on contact. “This is a waste of time... **Hydro Cannon**.” Following up with another spell, a concentrated gush of water shattered the frozen slime into pieces. Even its magic resistance was worthless against a combo like this.

Watching Olgan fire off class-4 spells like it was entirely routine, the leader of the apes swallowed his spit. “I won’t thank you. You’re the daughter of that coward. If it wasn’t for the word of the Grand Priestess... If it wasn’t for that

infuriating false god, I would have killed you already.”

“I don’t need your thanks... I have no intention of fighting you or your kin until this fight is over.”

Olgan and the ape stared off for a moment, but Monkey Magic looked away. He had sensed powerful determination in her eyes. “I like the look in your eyes. A real warrior strives to beat their father, their father’s father, and any ancestor that came before him.”

Olgan was speechless at the comment that came out of the blue. She had never expected to hear such words, much less from the leader of the apes. She had simply come to crush her father’s heart with her bare hands.

“As rambunctious as always. Bringing home a trove of monkeys?” A lascivious woman appeared from the end of the passage. Her lower body was that of a horse, signifying that she was a Centaur. The surviving apes stood on guard, and Mynk adorned her Angel Garb. The Centaur was a powerful force, often considered to be the third most powerful in Belphegor’s army.

“Gretel... Where’s Count Impaler?”

“He’s off on a stroll. I think he’s just about tearing up the forest of some filthy monkeys.” Gretel laughed, which enraged the apes.

“Not happening.” Mynk simply said. She had watched the very count being obliterated. “That Living Dead was destroyed not too long ago.”

“Who do you think you are, *bug* ...?”

Now Olgan had to laugh. Gretel had a brother. “Hansel, was it? Your brother. He’s been killed by a little *bug* , too.”

“You must be joking, Miss. My brother is far from perfect, but a *human*? We may need to work on your sense of humor.”

“I don’t want a sense of humor. I’ve only told the truth.”

Gretel’s eyes shifted by Olgan’s matter-of-factness. The human beside her with the Holy element armor may very well have done it. “You killed my brother,” Gretel said. “Thank you... for killing that disgrace to our clan!” She lunged and swung her curved sword at Mynk.

Mynk tried to dodge the attack, but her Moon Shoes bounced in a completely different direction, throwing her into the wall head-first.

“Owww... I don’t even know who your brother is!”

“Silence, human. That armor of yours is perfectly disgusting.” Gretel swung her sword again, only to be stopped by the kappa’s lance.

The kappa wore an uncharacteristically serious expression. “Do those legs belong to a Unicorn? That’s a divine creature that lives by lakes. Always cleans the water. For someone like me, they’re as precious as any god.”

“What’s your point, filthy beast?”

“Poor thing. Its beautiful white fur’s turned all grey.”

“Silence! Move this spear out of...” Gretel tried to knock his lance away to no avail. Xiaoshou’s eyes thinned. “Unhand—”

Gretel’s head was obliterated. Xiaoshou had shot from his mouth a laser-like beam of water, which pierced the ceiling above them with ease, silencing the other members in the room. Then, Xiaoshou began chopping Gretel’s torso off of her lower body with his lance, as if he was a lumberjack felling a tree. Gretel’s flesh tore, her guts spilled, and the sound of crunching bones echoed through the room.

After keeping at it for a while, Xiaoshou finally spoke. “Phew, that about does it. Now the spirit of this Unicorn can rest in peace!” The kappa wiped the sweat from his brow like he had just finished a good day’s work. Now that he was soaked in blood, however, even his smile seemed chilling.

“You scare me, Baldibald...”

“What’s that supposed to mean!? That monster took over a Unicorn’s—”

“The quiet ones are the scariest when they snap.”

“I didn’t snap at anything! I’d give anyone a big round of applause if they could make me snap!”

As the leader of the apes and the kappa kept at each other, Olgan pulled Mynk to her feet and turned to continue further downward. She noted how reliable the Anima were when they were on her side.

“Hey, Olgan... You’re sure they won’t cross over?”

“We’ll see,” Olgan said, and she hoped that they never would.

The pair descended lower. The only monsters they encountered were sporadic and unthreatening. As if they were being drawn in by something, they kept going lower and lower into the ground.

After they passed the fiftieth floor down, they noticed a difference in the area. This particular floor was decorated with vibrant flowers all over, and adorned with jewels. There were even fresh fruits and drinks placed on crystal furniture. This was nothing short of a grand welcome. They had now walked into an unbelievably extravagant ballroom the size of a baseball stadium. There was an eerie series of paintings on the walls and ceiling, hundreds of them, and all of the same beautiful woman.

“Welcome to my castle. Allow me to sincerely welcome you, my dear guests...!” Belphegor appeared, wearing his golden armor. Even amidst the glamor of this room, his full armor shone particularly bright, and his pitch-black wings elegantly stretched behind him. Belphegor faced Olgan and spread his arms like he was the dad of the year. “I’ve been long awaiting your return, dear daughter.”

“Your taste is revolting as always. Including that armor.”

“My, my. You must have left your manners *down there* . You’re breaking your father’s heart.”

The woman in each of the numerous paintings was Olgan’s mother. That fact alone seemed distasteful enough for her, but Belphegor’s armor seemed even worse. Back in the day, Olgan recalled that her father had worn something less obnoxious. “It suits you. Really highlights how hideous you are.”

“You don’t see the beauty of gold, the epitome of sloth and elegance...? Oh, dear daughter. Did you miss your father in your journey?” Belphegor shook his head and gazed up at the ceiling with what seemed like genuine sorrow.

Every dramatic gesture only enraged her more. “Once you’re gone from this world, I’ll begin to learn what happiness is.”

“Oh, I can’t believe my ears! A daughter killing her father!? It’s unthinkable...

The Great Light must be taking a nap!”

Before Olgan could reply, Monkey Magic broke the top of a wine bottle off against a table and drank from it. “We finally meet, coward. Today will be your death day.”

“Please, read the room, won’t you? This is a father-daughter reunion. Also, the wine you just had was a 367-year-old rarity. Why don’t you at least try and taste it?”

“Yammering on and on... Feel the wrath of our kin!”

Jingu Bang extended, striking Belphegor straight in the torso. The other apes assaulted Belphegor with their weapons, turning the party room into a brawl.

“My, what uncivilized friends you have...”

“I’ll tear off your head and drink your blood instead!”

“Oh! What an undignified declaration, befitting of beasts!” Dodging the Jingu Bang, Belphegor danced with one hand extended. With the occasional flutter of his wings, he tore any ape-hybrid he touched to pieces.

Seeing that the casualties of his men grew with every second, the leader of the apes looked desperate and exhausted, especially after fighting for an extended period of time. “I may die here and now, but you’re coming with me...!” Each and every one of Monkey Magic’s do-or-die attacks was dodged, as the pile of dead apes grew higher. However, their leader was past the point of no return.

Belphegor crooked his head as he diced up a pair of apes with his wings. “Sorry to interrupt your melancholy... But have I ever done anything to warrant such hate?”

“As if you don’t know...!”

“Don’t you step on ants when you walk, and crush nameless bugs when you lay? I simply took a few strolls through the woods.” Belphegor spread his arms in a wide shrug, genuinely wondering.

“You...!”

“Some ants happened to be under my boot during my strolls in the woods.

And now, a red-faced monkey rushes into my castle, screaming that *I* must pay for the deaths of their clan? Wah ha ha ha ha! I think you were *born* to amuse me.” Belphegor guffawed, shaking his shoulders, leaving him completely vulnerable.

The apes seized the chance and swarmed Belphegor, their weapons in hand. The frontline attackers struck Belphegor once and backed off, while those in the back fired off magic and arrows. The coordinated attack was executed at an incredible speed, but Belphegor continued laughing.

The kappa had an eerie feeling about it. “S-Something’s not right about this...”

“Keep going!” Monkey Magic shouted. “Keep attacking!”

“Your faces as red as your rear ends... Wah ha ha ha ha! You are truly—!” Belphegor held his gut and buckled over, losing his breath from laughing too hard. It almost looked like he was taking some damage from the attacks. “I am thankful for this wonderful encounter...! **Gust of Death x2** .” The wings on his back spread wide and flapped, generating whirlwinds that ruthlessly tore through the apes, filling the decorated interior with horrible blood splatter and screams.

After the winds had passed, the only ones left were Monkey Magic and the kappa, although both of them were torn up and badly bleeding. Behind them, Olgan was concentrating on some sort of work while Mynk protected her with a Defense spell.

“There’s only one thing left to do...” Monkey Magic muttered, reaching for his throat and yanking on a chain, as if he was trying to tear it off.

“Huh!? You can’t do that!” The kappa rushed to try and pry the ape’s arms away. “Not without Lady Tatsu’s permission, anyway! You’re losing your mind!”

“Losing my mind’s the only way to take him down.”

“Give me a break! Pull that trick this far underground... and we’ll be dead, too!”

Belphegor began to show interest in their quarrel. He didn’t seem to consider any of this to be combat. He saw this as merely an interactive performance.

“You have some sort of secret weapon. Oh, do show us. What’s a party without

some entertainment? If I was a betting Hellion... Yes, you must be preparing to throw a *monkey wrench* !" Belphegor curled up on the ground from laughter.

Monkey Magic's face grew even redder, but Olgan's voice finally stopped Belphegor's laughter. "I have a secret weapon," she said.

"Oh? You were so quiet that I thought you were crying in terror..." Belphegor crooked his neck upon seeing what Olgan had produced. He recognized the beautiful crystal ball. It was a treasure called Merciless World, and it used to belong to the treasury of his castle. "Bad, bad daughter. It seems you need a heavier punishment." Even as he chuckled, Belphegor couldn't look away from the crystal ball, which contained incredible magic within it.

This world was rife with Spell Stones that contained the power of simple magic and could be used by anyone. This crystal ball, on the other hand, could store a class-4 spell: the crowning achievement of magic in the scope of humanity. And Olgan was imbuing it with a class-5 spell. The crystal ball shone crimson, containing a Scorch spell, elevated from Fire.

Belphegor stared at the orb with nostalgia. "You've always liked to burn things. I can't remember how many times you tried to burn down this castle. I thought you might have grown up a bit from your journey in the..." Belphegor cut himself short, seeing that Olgan had produced another Merciless World, this one imbued with a class-5 Ice spell, elevated from Water.

"These take a long time to activate. You bought me enough time," Olgan said, casting a glance at the leader of the apes and the kappa. She was determined to take advantage of the apes, no matter how many died in the process. Monkey Magic stood, his face clouded with indignation. Then, Olgan produced a third crystal ball.

Even Belphegor let out a sound in shock. "Now, daughter... Where did you find—"

"I've traveled to dungeons all over the continent. I didn't spend my time as an adventurer for nothing." The third crystal lit up green, emitting violent gusts of wind in display of a class-5 Storm spell, elevated from Wind.

Finally, Belphegor had run out of patience. He charged at Olgan in large strides. "Dear daughter... Let's hand those over to father!" He, however, was

blown back. Mynk's Twinkle Star had struck him in his abdomen.

"That's for all the times you sent your *goons* after us..." Mynk snarled. "You're going to die now. Let us have a good night's rest for once."

Olgan produced yet another crystal ball, which began darkening to brown, indicative of a class-5 Rock spell, elevated from Earth.

The completion of the Four Elements prompted Belphegor to rush to his feet. "Th-This isn't funny! Daughter, what is the meaning of this!?" He leapt towards her through the air, drawing his sword. Then, a shadow rushed above him.

Leaping above Belphegor with her Moon Shoes, Mynk cleanly struck his golden helmet with Twinkle Star. Belphegor crashed to the ground, and Mynk declared victoriously: "Not so fast. You're not the only one with a pair of Dark Wings." With a hand on her right eye, Mynk let out a cute snicker.

After watching these events unfold, the ape and the kappa gave each other a look before charging at Belphegor at incredible speed. They were going to buy Olgan more time. Despite the damage they had accumulated, their attacks were as sharp as ever.

"You...! Stay down, you dying beasts! How dare you, scum of the continent...!"

"You don't sound so confident anymore!"

"Geh heh heh... Your daughter's something else, pops!"

Still affected by the hit he took from Twinkle Star, Belphegor was faltering, unable to focus his vision. Olgan produced a fifth crystal, into which she poured a Black spell, elevated from Darkness. Her expression could have been described as solemn, but she seemed to struggle controlling all of the crystal balls. Sweat poured down her face, and a violent chill coursed through her body, threatening to tear her to shreds.

"This is my last mercy to you..." Olgan produced a final crystal ball that emanated a bright, holy light. This seemed to severely affect Olgan herself, as a streak of blood spilled out of the corner of her mouth and her eyes became blood-shot. She had paid a fortune to have a cleric from the Tzardom of Light infuse this crystal ball with a class-5 Holy spell, elevated from Light. Belphegor's

armor began clattering at the ambient Holy energy from the class-5 spell, the most devastating kind of magic to Hellions. Now, the six crystal balls floated before her to form a magic circle known as the Six-Elemental Star, glowing in all colors imaginable.

“No...” Belphegor muttered.

“You should have killed me when you had the chance,” Olgan answered.

Seeing that the spell was about to activate, the ape and the kappa delivered one last blow before retreating out of the way, as if they had all rehearsed this coordination. The colors from the star blended into one another, until the light from the magic circle formed and took the shape of a woman. The woman, glowing in all colors, soon became engulfed in flames, shifting her appearance into that of a horned devil.

Belphegor seemed to realize who the image was depicting. He let out a cry in a desperate tone that he had never used before. “Wait! Stop it, I tell you... Olgan will you really... kill your own father!?”

“You’re not my father.” With Olgan’s final declaration, the incredible spell was unleashed.

—Judgment Day

The blinding flames, with the devilish woman at their core, rushed at Belphegor. An explosion occurred once the woman hit her target, and embraced by the infernal pyre that remained, Belphegor twisted, screaming in agony. His silhouette blurred in the inferno as the grand devil stumbled to and fro like a zombie. The destructive energy of the spell closed in tighter on its mark before dissipating, and vision returned to all in the room.

Belphegor, who stood at the epicenter of the explosion, was now in a pathetic state, his golden armor completely bent out of shape as black smoke rose from his body. “Ol...gan...” Belphegor cursed, reaching out in front of him. Then, he fell onto his back.

For some time, no one dared speak. Finally, Mynk called out. “It’s finally... Over.” Relieved as she was, she spoke with some trepidation. Olgan had just killed her own father, after all. Mynk couldn’t entirely celebrate their victory,

not just yet.

“I’m sorry I used all those treasures. One of those could have bought us a mansion or two.”

“Dummy...” Mynk countered. “We’re adventurers. We’ll settle down when we retire. But first, we need to get you some rest somewhere.” Mynk looked around, supporting Olgan. She felt powerless, as any of her healing spells would only hurt Olgan instead. She was reminded of the painful divide between humans and Firebrands.

“Drink this...” Monkey Magic grunted, tossing two tablets their way. The black spheres emitted a stinging smell.

“Wh-What are these!? They stink!”

“They’re a precious medicine called Pop Pop Fizz Fizz, that my clan made.”

Mynk shrieked at the stench, but Olgan tossed them into her mouth. She looked like she nearly choked on them, too weak to swallow. “Can I get some water, Mynk?”

“Geh heh heh. I got you covered,” the kappa said, rubbing his dish with his hands. Then, bubbles of water began to form on the surface. The color drained from the faces of the adventurers. “This one’s on me. Now drink up.”

“No thanks...” Olgan muttered.

“No! Never! That’s disgusting!”

“Disgusting...!?”

As the kappa parroted, Monkey Magic reached for a handful of bubbles and swallowed his own medicine with it. “Hm. The Baldibald water is the best.” The kappa did the same with his dose. Olgan and Mynk drank water with one of Mynk’s spells and forced the bitter medicine down.

Mynk yelped from the overwhelming bitterness and rolled around on the ground. This particular medicine was made from various herbs and materials dug up by the Boar Animadmiral, with the properties to heal any species. However, the thing was powerfully bitter and this was completely unhelped by a mouthful of water.

“Don’t you wish you didn’t have a sense of taste, Mynk...?” Olgan muttered.

Mynk continued to cast her Water spell, chugging as much as she could as she laid on the ground. She almost looked like she was a drunk desperately trying to sober up. “How can something be so bitter...!? My damage is healing, but I’m dying inside!”

“Healing but dying? Are you an idiot?”

“Says the ape!”

“Apes are the wisemen of the forest. We’re *born* different from you humans.” Monkey Magic dramatically tapped his temple.

Just as Mynk was about to retort, the golden helmet rose from the ground. Everyone in the room was stunned.

“Interesting piece of medicine,” Belphegor spoke. “I make my own *medicine* on occasion and spread it among the ants.”

“How...?” Olgan muttered.

“Yes! That’s it! *That’s* the face I wanted to see!” Belphegor stood, clapping his hands, as if he was long awaiting for this very moment. “Now, it’s not easy to feign damage! But I wasn’t too bad of an actor, was I? Anything for my dear daughter.” He rambled on, nodding in excitement. The armor, which had been bent in all over and scorched, began to return to its original form and luster.

“It can’t be...” Olgan mumbled.

“Of course it can. I prepared this armor to surprise you for our reunion. It’s an Ancient Fragment that negates even class-5 spells. All of that magic, wasted... Truly a testament to the power of fatherly love!” Color drained from the faces of everyone else in the room, as they began to realize the gravity of the situation. “What’s more, this armor negates all forms of physical attacks, too. Those apes danced their hearts out, but had not even dealt me a single point of damage. Oh, how cruel it can be to peek behind the curtain.” Belphegor looked to the ape corpses strewn about and picked one up while pinching his nose. “You were just talking of some strange medicine. Why don’t you use some of these? I’ve heard that ape brain is quite the delicacy. Perhaps they’ll make for a useful remedy.”

Monkey Magic forced himself up. Unable to keep quiet while his men were desecrated. “I will kill you...”

“Now, now. Weren’t you listening? Swing around your precious stick as you may, it would only be gentle taps to me.”

“Get your filthy hands off of my men...”

“Let me give you a clue as to how you can defeat me! You should drag that Greole out of the ground. Even this armor, tragically, can’t protect me from a class-6 spell like his. Of course, he’s been done in by those wretched angels.” Belphegor feigned a sigh, as he chuckled the lifeless ape aside. He knew that, even if he did break Greole free, the King of Devils would not possess the full powers he used to. “As fun as that was, it’s time to wrap things up. I’ll have the non-family rest for a while. I’ll send someone to fetch you later. **Dark Beam** .” With the wave of a hand, a black beam swept through the room.

Mynk alone pulled herself up from the cloud of dust. She had accumulated the least amount of damage. “You won’t... get away with this... anymore...”

“Ah! My dear daughter calls you a friend! In consideration of your service thus far, I will be happy to appoint a special room for you. You can look forward to it,” Belphegor cheerfully declared as he grabbed Mynk by her head and slammed her into the ground, as if he was taking out a pest. “Now for some quality father-daughter time.” Belphegor grabbed Olgan by the leg, and began dragging her away like some monster dragging its prey into a dark corner.

“No... Let me... Go...”

“Mm, the hopelessness in your eyes. Finally, you’re daddy’s girl again. Don’t worry, I’ve kept your old room exactly as it was. Built a new ‘hut,’ too.”

“Demon... Lord...”

“Hm? The King of Devils, you mean? Sorry to give you a false sense of hope. Greole has been long sealed away for 2000 years. Even if he *did* come out of it now, he wouldn’t stand a chance against me in his weakened state.”

“Help...”

Seeing a tear fall from Olgan’s eyes, Belphegor guffawed, slapping his knee.

Finally, he had reaped the fruit of his dramatic presentation. “Wah ha ha ha! No one’s going to save you. Has anyone ever saved you in your life? I let you go on purpose last time, but not again. You’ll spend the rest of your life under my roof. Isn’t that wonderful?” Belphegor’s helmet twisted, his eyes gleaming in a cruel, infinitely slimy way.

Old memories flooded Olgan, finally breaking her resolve. “N-No... Noooooooooooooooooo!”

“Wah ha ha ha! That cry! We’re father and daughter again, after those long centuries!”

Mynk tried to crawl after Olgan as she was dragged away, but even she didn’t have enough strength to rise to her feet. “Ol...gan...” Mynk saw that both the Animadmiral and the kappa were out cold, not moving a finger as they lay on the ground. She couldn’t even tell if they were alive. Mynk inched in the direction where Belphegor had taken Olgan. She was surrounded by ape corpses, making her feel like she was in hell.

——??th floor below Belphegor’s castle, the Treasury.

The room was piled high with treasure, works of art, magical items, and historical artifacts from all over the world. There was a High-Ranking Devil raking in all sorts of treasures and magical items into a big cloth-wrap. It was Kale, infamous for his free-spirited nature.

“Gonna borrow these for a bit, Bel. You don’t mind, do you? You look pretty pleased with your toys up there,” Kale said to himself, as Kale used a literal rake to pull treasures into his wrap. Mysteriously, the treasures that touched the wrap disappeared into the piece of cloth, indicating that it was some sort of magical item that provided storage. “But does reuniting with your daughter really mean that much to you? I guess I’m happy you’re happy.” Each piece he was stealing was invaluable treasure, but the devil in a boy’s skin was regarding them like he was just raking in leaves in a yard. After raking in all the treasure into his wrap, he slung it over his shoulder like a cartoon thief.

“Sniff sniff sniff... I smell treasure around here... Hey! You’re a thief!”

Kale jumped at that voice. He would have a hard time explaining himself to a guard. “No I’m just borrowing these from Bel... Huh?” Somehow, a human was

standing opposite him. A girl, no less. Kale stood confused for a while, before making a conclusion. “Oh you’re one of the intruders? I heard one of them was a human!” While Kale’s eyes lit up with intrigue, the only thing Akane was looking at was the wrap on Kale’s shoulder.

“Yeah, whatever. That’s *my* treasure, so I’m gonna need that back.”

“That’s quite the audacity... I guess I can’t blame you,” Kale said, laughing at himself. He stopped when he realized a familiar scent on the girl. “You have the same smell as *him*. You know him?”

“Who, Hakuto? Anyway, give those back to me.” Akane began walking right up to Kale.

The devil frowned. If he caused a scene now, he might be swarmed with Belphegor’s guards. “If you know that guy, I’ll kill you too, someday...”

Just as a broken pumpkin appeared at Kale’s feet, Akane sprinted. Her *tonfa* struck Kale right in the gut, buckling him over. A few shiny things fell out of his wrap, but Kale didn’t have the strength to even reach for them. The pumpkin broken in half began to restore itself. Akane silently slammed a series of attacks into the pumpkin in an attempt to smash it, but it was unaffected as it began to swallow Kale up. “Ha ha... Nice try. This is my favorite magical item. Once it starts, no one can stop it or attack me. How’s it feel, stupid!?”

“Give me back my treasure.”

“I told you! No one can stop—” Kale shut up, noticing Akane’s expression. He felt like the void in her eyes was sucking his soul out.

“Give it back.”

“Stop... I told you, it’s no use!” Even as they spoke, Akane never relented in her attacks. Her barrage of *tonfa* , elbows, and knees shook the pumpkin further, freezing Kale’s spine even in the middle of his assured safety. “Hurry up... Go! Go!”

“I’ll never forget your face. No matter where you hide or where you run, I’ll find you and end you.”

“Hurry up and take me away already!” Kale shouted, feeling like Akane’s

storm of attacks might actually break through.

Soon, the pumpkin finally completed forming and disappeared like a puff of smoke.

Akane was left alone with a few of the treasures that had fallen out of Kale's wrap. "Tsk. Not fair... That was my big chance." Picking up the few on the ground, Akane began closely inspecting the treasury. As she had gone deeper than the rest of the party, she really didn't want her effort to be for naught. "Wonder what Hakuto's up to. He better not be doing something fun without me again." Akane produced a magnifying glass, inspecting the walls and the ground.

After a while, she felt an incredible quake, far above her. "That's..." Akane reached for a bottle of water from her Backup Backpack and drank it. For some reason, she was parched.

She recalled a particular summer, long ago. It was the day she first tasted defeat. A scorching day where anyone would have kept reaching for some water.

Akira Ono, the Final Boss

——Belphegor's castle.

"What *are* you...?" The Demon Lord puffed white smoke upon encountering the steel-colored slime.

Bizarrely, the slime was covering a mirror.

Welcome home, Creator.

"Huh...?" the Demon Lord blurted out at the text on the mirror. He didn't recall ever creating such a weird creature, nor doing anything else that warranted this thing calling him 'creator.' "I've been tangled up in all sorts of misunderstandings in this world... Don't tell me you're starting yet another one of them." The last thing he wanted was this inorganic matter, which was at best a viscous blob, to have some misplaced ideas about him.

The slime didn't answer, but another line of text appeared on the mirror.

Change current settings? YES / NO

"Settings...?" The Demon Lord thinned his eyes. In this world, the settings he had designed for the game had saved him countless times, yet confused him and put him in danger numerous other times. This was one particular word he couldn't ignore. "You might be mistaking me for someone else. You don't seem antagonistic, at least."

The mirror remained silent, displaying the same line of text on its surface. It seemed to lack any capability for conversation. Even so, the slime seemed perfectly harmless, and even ever-so-slightly gleeful. The Demon Lord was taken aback that he was able to sense such an emotion from a slime.

Confirm current settings: Jump to B40. Make changes? YES / NO

"B40? What are you talking about...?" The Demon Lord's continued line of questioning was left unanswered. He felt like he was trying to converse with a machine, which gave him an idea. "Let me rephrase. Who made that setting?"

Name search... Complete. Olgan.

"Olgan? Next question. Who created you?"

Creator.

“That again... Who is this creator?”

Creator.

Seeing the same letters blink on the screen, the Demon Lord let out a sigh. There didn't seem to be anything to gain by continuing this bizarre conversation. He still didn't know why no one was outside the castle, despite their plans to meet up there. (Even Communication is disabled in here, somehow... Better assume they're in trouble.) Even in his Game, large-scale combat, sieges, event fights, and boss fights all came with unexpected accidents, which made him a pro at dealing with them. (If Olgan made the setting, it has to mean something... Is it a note, telling me to meet her there? In any case, I can't ignore it.) In addition to the Demon Lord's calculated assessment, the biggest motivator was that he couldn't be bothered to climb down forty floors on his own.

“Jump, huh...? Very well. Send me to the destination Olgan set.” This prompted the slime to gleefully writhe towards him. It was more than a little terrifying. “Why... are you coming closer? It's kind of creepy... Wai—”

Sucked into the mirror, the Demon Lord's surroundings changed in an instant. Despite the fact that he was supposedly underground, the Demon Lord noticed that the ceilings were high, and the walls looked sturdy as if they were made with concrete. (What is this place...? It reminds me of the Bastille Dungeon.) This resemblance was only reinforced further by how brightly the space was lit.

With a few exceptions, those with Hellion or monster blood were unable to use the power of Light. Therefore, they often used humans and Anima as slaves to build anything they needed. With catacombs of this magnitude, the number of slaves used for the labor was undoubtedly in the ballpark of tens or hundreds of thousands.

(In any case, I can't leave that mirror up there...) After taking in his surroundings, he Quick Traveled to the room with the mirror. Seeing the Demon Lord reappear, the slime happily protruded an arm-like appendage and waved it to and fro, as if it was greeting an old friend. “What are you, really...?” the Demon Lord muttered. “Just seems like you'll cause me more trouble if

someone sees you, so you're coming with me." He produced his scroll-shaped Item Folder, took the slime by its appendage, and stored it into the folder.

Z COPY 07

The text that appeared on his item folder sent something crawling up his spine. An emotionless string of text that seemed nothing like an item. The Demon Lord felt like he caught a glimpse of the nature of the 'Creator,' who most likely named the thing. "Everyone in this world really hates normal names..." The Demon Lord tried, unsuccessfully, to laugh it off. The furrow of his brow only grew deeper. (Forget it. It's not the time to get into that...) With that thought, the Demon Lord Quick Traveled back to B40, carefully listening for any sound or sign of life. While he picked up nothing from this floor, he noticed faint footsteps. "Guess they went downstairs."

As he descended further, the Demon Lord couldn't help but notice the sporadic monster carcasses. There were far too few of them. (The gate was open to start with... No one was in the castle up there, and barely any monsters underground. It's too unguarded, even for it to be a trap.)

There were similar structures in the Sleepless Castle that he had once created, designed to draw in the attackers only to ambush them. Those structures, however, were never a permanent solution since they didn't have replay value, per se. His enemies were human players, after all not strings of code. Humans always thought ahead, worked together, and persisted with their research until every last corner of the place was mapped out and analyzed. After 15 years of unrelenting curiosity, the Sleepless Castle was stripped bare of its defenses. The fall of the Sleepless Castle and the subsequent conclusion of the Game was not a product of luck or coincidence, but a victory won by the collective determination of the players. For someone like the Demon Lord who had engaged in maddening sieges day-in and day-out for over a decade, the state of this castle was beyond careless, but downright lazy.

"The master of this castle... Must not know how much damage complacency can cause." The Demon Lord followed the faint sense of movement and footsteps further down the catacombs. While there were some traps along the way, they were all lackluster or had all already been destroyed by the apes.

When he stepped down to B50, however, a completely different atmosphere greeted him. “What kind of place is this...?” His first impression was that it was a dilapidated ballroom, but with a heap of dead bodies. The expensive-looking tables, glasses, bottles of wine, and fruits were trampled and smashed, and the few portraits hung on the walls were all shredded. The Demon Lord spotted the leader of the apes and the kappa on the ground. “Hey, if you’re alive, say so.” He generated a bottle of Fuji Water, as he had done back in the cottage. The bottle was so large it even came with a ladle. Seeing that the two on the ground could barely move their arms, the Demon Lord lifted the bottle and poured some of its contents down the ape’s throat.

“*Grmb... S-Stop... Grmbr!*”

“Hm? You’re alive, after all.”

“Are you trying to kill me, False God!? Because you nearly did!”

“You’re livelier than ever.”

“Livelier... Ooh-ah? Something’s weird...” The ape shook his head in surprise as he rapidly healed both 50 HP and Stamina.

The Demon Lord created another bottle of Fuji Water, and went to make the kappa drink it.

“M-Mister Shadow...” a weakened voice called back. “If that’s water... Can you pour it on the dish on my head...?”

“The dish...?” The Demon Lord poured out a ladle full of the water with a curious expression and splashed it onto the kappa’s dish.

The kappa immediately piped up. “Mm-mm-mm! This is something else! Now that’s what I call refreshing!”

“G-Glad to hear...”

“Give me more, Sir! Right here, on my dish! Give me another load of that *good stuff!*”

“No, get away from me...!” The Demon Lord threw the ladle at the kappa and lit a cigarette. He couldn’t help but realize how difficult it was to remain serious around the *Journey to the West* duo. “So, what happened? Where are the

others?" He hadn't seen Olgan, Mynk, or Akane anywhere. The only thing he saw around him was gruesome carnage.

"Here, Baldibald. I don't know how, but this water gives you strength."

"Ge-foo! It's too good! My dish is dripping wet!"

"Getting wet on the False God's water? What a slut kappa you are."

"Not fair! I can't help what my body needs...!"

"Knock off that disgusting discussion!" The Demon Lord had heard enough. Their conversation wasn't going anywhere. "How can you be goofing off in the middle of all of this carnage?"

"False God... My men fought with every drop of their strength. It would be a shame for their leader to mourn the deaths of proud warriors."

"I see...! I shouldn't have said that." The Demon Lord dropped it, seeing that the leader of the apes had flashed him a sharp glare. He wondered if the ape and the kappa were simply acting unbothered, regardless of how they actually felt. "Let's get back on track. Where are the others?"

"Belphegor took his daughter somewhere, and the weird girl with bandages over her eyes followed her. Don't know where they went."

With that, the Demon Lord began wandering off. They hadn't met up with Akane yet.

"We're going back to the forest, False God. We can't take out that coward right now."

"Go back for what?"

"With Lady Tatsu's permission, I'll kill that coward."

"I see. Then you two don't need to come back here. Take the humans away on your way out. By the way, are there any Bunnies in your nation who came from the village of Rabbi?"

"Bunny? Those rabbit-hybrids that like to eat carrots?"

"If any of them want to go back to Rabbi, take them there, too."

The leader of the ape pondered the request for a moment, before finally

speaking. “False God, that coward is powerful. Not even you could beat him.”

The Demon Lord paused for a moment, then turned around. His expression was completely unaffected. “Don’t worry. The only things that can kill me are of my own creation.” With that, the Demon Lord followed the trail of blood downward.

The leader of the apes silently watched him leave.

“You sure you didn’t want to stop him?” the kappa asked.

“I have no strength to stop him now.”

“But what if he dies? What will we say to the Grand Priestess...?”

“The look in his eyes was not one of a man walking to his death.” The leader of the apes looked around, as if to burn the sight of his comrades into his memory. “Even if the False God fails, I will kill that coward... So rest easy.”

The ape and the kappa remained silent for some time before heading back above ground, in the opposite direction as the Demon Lord.

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord was listening for a familiar voice.

“Let me go...! Olgan’s...!”

The Demon Lord approached the direction of the voice to find Mynk being covered by a red, gelatinous blob. The slimy thing shifted its form as if on a whim, taking the shape of a giant hand, a silhouette, and even Mynk herself. The Demon Lord exhaled smoke at the situation that reminded him of a scene out of an X-rated fanfic. “What... Are you doing?” he asked.

“Demon Lord!? Great! Get this Red Slime off of me!”

As if to rebel against Mynk’s plea, the slime extended an appendage, wandering around Mynk’s body. The Demon Lord was at a loss for words at the situation.

“Slimy, slimy!”

“Hey, get off of me! Demon Lord, hurry!”

“I’d love to help you, but the gravity on this planet is a little stronger than normal...” The Demon Lord wished he had a smartphone just so he could take a

picture.

Mynk, of course, didn't find any humor in the situation. "Gravity!? You're just sitting there smoking!"

"Strange how its hand is moving." The Demon Lord took his time as he put out his cigarette in his portable ashtray, and couldn't help but wonder why he kept running into slimes today. "A bizarre creature... This one makes sounds, too." As the Demon Lord approached, the red slime slid off of Mynk and lunged at the Demon Lord as it was going to entangle him. While the attack was quicker than expected, it was naturally blocked by Assault Queller.

"Slimy slime...?"

"Are you like that other slime on the mirror? Or are you an enemy?" The Demon Lord grabbed the red slime by what appeared to be a garment and stared it down.

Seeing that the Demon Lord was close enough to kiss the slime, Mynk screamed. "Don't get so close to anything that looks at me like that! You're going to *violate* it, like some doujin!"

"The last thing I need is you complicating things! How do you know about doujinshi in this world, anyway...?"

"Slimyyyy." Having seen how outclassed it was, the Red Slime reverted to its blob form, shrinking into a puddle.

After the encounter with the bizarre Slime earlier, the Demon Lord was more straightforward with this one. "This place will turn into a battlefield soon. If you're not going to fight me, get far away from this castle."

"Slime..."

The Demon Lord stood Mynk up. Before he could ask her what had happened, she took off running. "Hey, can't you tell me—"

"There's no time! Olgan's father took her!"

"I got that, but you're going to trip on impatience."

"What, you want to chat over tea— ahh!" Mynk had already tripped on something, and was now entangled in rope and hanging from the ceiling. She

would have never tripped such a trap if she wasn't rushing to the point of losing peripheral vision "What is this!? Demon Lord, get it off of me!"

"You can't catch a break, can you...? And stop moving, you'll get even more tangled."

Mynk flailed about, indeed tangling herself even further. Before she knew it, she was nearly practicing *shibari* .

"What are you doing...? You're a natural masochist at this point."

"Just get me out of it, already...!"

"Ugh..." The Demon Lord threw Sodom's Fire to sever the rope from the ceiling. Mynk fell face-first onto the ground. She glared up at the Demon Lord, twitching in pain from the sudden face-plant. This was a most thoughtless and uncaring rescue. "Get yourself together. Your wounds are deep."

"How can you just say that!?"

"And these are for long-distance travel... Keep them off when you don't need them." The Demon Lord gently took the Moon Shoes from Mynk's feet. He recalled how Akane had really liked the pair, calling them one of her partners. The significance of Akane lending them to someone was not lost on him. "I see you were getting along well with Akane. Well, I hope you two keep being friends."

"I-It's not that..." Mynk couldn't help but avert her eyes from the uncharacteristically calm and gentle Demon Lord. She felt a mysterious sensation, like she had just caught a glimpse of something she was never meant to. Even so, the sensation kind of tickled her back.

The Demon Lord stored the shoes into his Item Folder and stood again. "Akane's... wherever she wants to be, so that's fine. Where is Olgan?"

"Further down, I think... High-ranking devils are usually careful about protecting themselves... Yeah."

Unsure of what took the spunk out of Mynk all of a sudden, the Demon Lord created another bottle of Fuji Water, in an overly generous gesture. "Drink this and take a break. I'll go find Olgan."

“W-Wait... I’m coming, too! I can’t sit around when she’s in danger!”

“I understand your desire. You’ll probably regret it,” the Demon Lord warned, ambiguously

Mynk gulped. Nothing was going to keep her from going to her partner when she was in need. Drinking from the bizarre bottle, Mynk renewed her resolve.

“No matter how powerful the... Wait, what *is* this!? Elixir!?”

“Elix...? No, it’s just water.”

“As if! Don’t tell me! You’ve laced some vile contract into this liquid that binds my soul to you, or something! Have you no shame, Demon Lord!?”

“It’s just water.”

Leaving the rambling Mynk behind, the Demon Lord headed further down. In fact, regardless of any effects it possessed, the Demon Lord really had produced nothing more than a bottle of water.

——A private room, B??.

After however long of being unconscious, Olgan was awakened by the pulsing of dull pain throughout her body. She stirred and heard the clanking of chains. She was chained to a chair with her hands tied behind her back, a coil of chain at her feet... A familiar feeling.

“You’re finally up.” A voice spoke, evoking a violent physiological reaction within Olgan. She couldn’t imagine a worse sight to wake up to. “How do you like the room?” the voice continued. “I made the place up just for you,” Belphegor boasted, outstretching his arms. The room was exceedingly wide and tall. Unlike the other spaces in the catacombs, this room was cave-like, with bare rock walls. “Behold the walls. They’re my prized collection. Had them gathered from all around the continent. I’ve dreamed of our reunion, meticulously maintaining and polishing them every day.”

The walls were crowded with various torture equipment. Just in her vicinity, in addition to sharp blades and blunt objects, needles of all sizes lined a wooden shelf. The expansive room was packed with equipment created for the sole purpose of inflicting pain. Olgan even spotted some sort of bed that was made for restraining a victim.

“Oh, did this catch your eye...? This one is clever. Tears the gut of the subject and extracts their entrails alive. With the turn of this handle here, the criminal dies as they watch their own organs being coiled away,” Belphegor gleefully explained, then strode over to a large bull-shaped object and stroked its head as if he was appreciating a masterpiece. “This is a bull made of brass. Its back opens, where the prisoner can be stored. It locks the criminal inside and roasts them with fire. The heat turns the bull gold, making for a majestic sight. Its mouth is open, tuning the dying screams into a beautiful note.” Belphegor continued stroking the bull. “What a good boy.” He stroked his instruments with gentle care and affection that he had never shown Olgan. “And this belt, for example... Oh, this collar took quite some effort to make.”

As Belphegor went on showing off his collection, tears fell from Olgan’s eyes, and she began to quake all over. The fear of knowing that all of those pieces would soon be turned against her was overbearing. “Please... No...”

“Hmm? I can’t hear you! Oh, I almost forgot. I paid close attention to the lighting in this room, too. I even went through the trouble of ordering whale oil from a distant land.” Belphegor thumped his chest, as if to emphasize his hard work. Whale oil, in this world, had become much too dangerous to acquire feasibly, and had fallen out of circulation. While the oil could be used for light, it emitted a certain stench that added to the dark atmosphere of the room. A portion of the wall was dedicated to a painting of Olgan’s mother, and illuminated by the whale oil lamp, the figure in the painting was shedding tears through the flickering of the light. “Let’s see. I should remodel the room every thirty years or so. Ten remodelings over 300 years... I don’t mind, Dear Daughter. I will make sure you won’t get bored.”

The words ‘300 years’ sank Olgan’s heart. She would have chosen death without hesitation, but this cruel king would not allow her the privilege so easily. “Please...” Olgan pleaded. “I won’t... disobey you again...”

“You’ve forgotten how to beg in our time apart.” With a disgusted expression, Belphegor slammed his fist into Olgan’s face, and he repeated the motion twice and thrice, causing Olgan’s face to swell up and turn red from the blood. “Dear Daughter... You know that’s not the tone to use when asking your father for a favor.”

“No... more... Why me...? Why do I always...?”

“Hah ha! That’s a little better, but it’s far from satisfactory.” Belphegor yanked Olgan’s hood off of her head, revealing something that shouldn’t have been there. “I kept quiet about it to preserve the integrity of our reunion, but *what* is this?” Belphegor spat out. There was no way for a Firebrand to grow horns. “Found something in the land of humans...? Or perhaps in the ancient dungeons. In any case, I cannot stand to see horns on a mixed blood.”

“P-Please... Not my horns! Please, anything but my horns...!”

“Is this the source of your little rebellion? All you need is your Dear Father. We must strip away such— Grah!” Belphegor grabbed one of the horns to tear it off of her head, then retracted his hand after feeling a powerful burn. “What the..!? What is this heat...?” It was inconceivable that he would feel anything through his invincible armor that blocked physical attacks and magic. The only exception was... “A class-6 spell...? On those little horns? Impossible... It’s unthinkable! Olgan... how did you grow these horns!? Tell me!”

Watching Belphegor lose his cool, Olgan’s tears finally stopped. At the same time, her blurred vision was restored, and the dark room became clearer. The sight she saw was as heinous as ever, but there was a small glimmer of hope. “Heh...” Olgan let out a little chuckle. She had forgotten something important while she was overwhelmed by the flood of her worst memories.

“What’s so funny? Have you forgotten the only actions allowed to you? You may only cry, scream, or plead for your father’s mercy. Nothing else.”

“I’m... protected.”

“What’s that?”

“Even when I’m back here... I’m—”

Choking Olgan with one hand, Belphegor’s face contorted with frustration. She used to always be in tears, begging for mercy. Now she was showing a streak of independence, which very much irritated him. “Unacceptable. Your horns, your attitude... Nothing about this is acceptable.”

“I’m not... your toy anymore. I’m a real devil now.”

Belphegor walked over to the wooden shelf and produced a plier-like tool, designed to peel, pinch, and twist. “I’d best pull out your tongue first... It irritates my ears.”

Much to Belphegor’s surprise, Olgan’s expression didn’t change. In fact, she stuck her tongue out of her mouth. If her hands weren’t tied, she would have pulled down one eyelid to complete the traditional display of insult.

“I see... I don’t know what you’re holding on to, but it seems I need to crush it here and now. I’ll switch things up.” Belphegor tossed the pliers aside and grabbed a vial instead. “I gave you too much of a tolerance through experimenting with all of that poison... But this one is exceptional. I’ve tried various applications on some lowly beasts, and it was quite the amusing sight.” Much of Olgan’s skin was poisoned from the result of being subjected to constant exposure from a young age. Part of her skin had even turned scale-like. “I wonder what will grow on you next. Perhaps you’ll turn part-beast!” He splashed the poison into Olgan’s mouth, and her expression twisted. It burned her throat and her stomach as unbearable pain overcame her.

“I know! Perhaps it will turn you half-ape! If you look like them, those apes outside might take you in! Wah ha ha ha!” Belphegor laughed and clapped his hands, reassured that, now, things were as they should be. “That means I must gather a horde of *live* monkeys...” With a hand to his chin, Belphegor paced in circles, plunging into thought. Whenever he found something that really piqued his interest, Belphegor set aside his sloth and became incredibly productive. “I know. I’ll have that slacker go hunt the apes! I need to calculate the formula for the new... Hm?”

A gut-rattling thud came from above. Belphegor gazed up at the ceiling to see that few pieces of rock were coming loose from the vibrations. He had never before felt his meticulously constructed catacombs shake, for whatever reason. “An earthquake... Then why would the sound come from above...?” Belphegor astutely noticed that Olgan was beginning to smirk as she watched rock and dust fall from the ceiling. “What? Are you hallucinating from the pain already?”

“Heh... Didn’t think he’d do it here.”

“Dear Daughter... It’s much too early to lose your sanity.” Belphegor feared

that she had broken too quickly.

However, the expression on Olgan's face was of relieved exasperation. "Apparently... This is a... veteran strategy..."

"What are you going on about?" Belphegor snarled as the quake intensified, the destructive noises rapidly approaching the torture chamber. Just as Belphegor's ears began to ring, his vision shook, and a large hole blew open in the ceiling. "What the...!?"

Amidst the new drizzle of rock and a cloud of dust, a dark silhouette rose from the floor. A brazen figure, holding a woman at his side.

"Wh-What are you thinking...!? I thought I was going to die! You know what? I'm pretty sure I *did* !"

"I told you you'd regret it..."

"You didn't tell me you were going to plunge through the catacombs! Don't you have *any* common sense!?"

"You're the one to talk..."

Olgan's vision blurred again hearing the voice, which felt nostalgic to her after everything she had just been through. She couldn't put into words how relieved she was if she tried.

Even Belphegor couldn't conceal that he was shaken by the sudden intruder. "You might be the most intrusive guest I've ever had... How did you get down here?"

The Demon Lord set Mynk down and took in his surroundings... A terribly dark and depressing room filled with countless torture devices. "Are you Olgan's father? Just from your tacky armor and this dreadful room, I've learned more about your stupid life and character than I'd like to," the Demon Lord declared, facing down the top contender for the next King of Devils. With one glance around the room, he knew that he and Belphegor would never reach a point of understanding.

Belphegor ignored the Demon Lord and turned to Olgan. "Is *this* what you are holding onto...?" He looked genuinely disappointed. The man was a mere

human, and so was the woman beside him. “It was a good touch to train those apes, but that was apparently the last of it... It seems I must groom you under my care.”

“I will... never...”

Seeing Olgan answer with shallow breaths, Mynk’s expression shifted. She could see by the profuse sweat on her face that Olgan had clearly been poisoned. “Olgan doesn’t look right... I think she’s been poisoned!”

“First a curse, now poison...?”

Belphegor threw Olgan, still chained to the chair, at the two intruders. He seemed to be losing interest. “My Dear Daughter has drunk my new poison... Parts of her body will change first, but she’ll die if left alone. What will you do now?” Belphegor spread his arms wide, in expectation of a show. He wanted to do something to forget the disappointment that Olgan’s determination was relying on a *human* .

“Come on, Olgan! Drink this!”

“Mynk...”

Mynk produced an antidote and poured it through Olgan’s lips, but her pained expression didn’t change. Any of her Light or Holy antidote magic would only damage Olgan. The fact that she had never needed an antidote to any poison before now came back to bite her.

Watching Mynk frantically tend to Olgan, Belphegor spoke out, frustrated. “You think your human antidotes will do anything to a poison of my creation? At this rate, my daughter’s whole body will become that of a filthy beast.”

The Demon Lord, as he tore apart Olgan’s chains, couldn’t help but ask, “Why poison your own daughter...? You get your kicks out of this?” He couldn’t understand a single line of thought within that shiny armor.

Belphegor shook his head, chuckling at the question. “Humans indeed are lower than apes... Of course, your bug-sized brain cannot comprehend. This is a display of my love, as a ruler of all, and a form of education for my daughter.”

“You call this love and education, huh...? No one chooses their parents, I

suppose.” The Demon Lord took out the small token he had carefully kept on him—a rare item once called the Empire Mint in the game. It was the same one Akane had found the other day, and it was his only Mint so far.

“What?” Belphegor laughed. “What greater honor is there than being born as the daughter of I, the next King of Devils?”

“You want to be a cardboard cut-out? How comical... Cash In.” the Demon Lord scoffed and opened his admin screen. He selected the Neutralizer, a weapon once popular in the game that neutralized poison. Poison was one of the most prevalent status conditions, inflicted by coating weapons, dosing food or drink, or via skill. “This Neutralizer eliminates any and all poisons in your system.” A bright light appeared above the Demon Lord, into which the Mint was taken. Then, a blue vial materialized and gently floated down. The vial was enveloped in fractals of light, which gave it the appearance of a divine item from the heavens.

“What... is that? What did you do, Human?”

Ignoring Belphegor’s remark, the Demon Lord tossed the vial to Mynk in such a casual manner that she became flustered after catching it.

“H-Hey...! Isn’t this a super powerful item!? Why’d you chuck it like that!?”

“Give her that.” The Demon Lord lit a cigarette, relieved about one thing in particular. Halfway through the game’s existence, the Empire Mints were given a backstory that Akane was in charge of managing their circulation. As a result, Akane had always appeared during a Cash In. Her attire and line would change each time, so the players had grown to call her the Mint Goddess or Mint Fairy, and eventually “Superstar of the Sleepless Castle.” (Phew... Good thing it was an earlier version.) Akane popping up in a bizarre outfit would have ruined the mood, to say the least. After using all sorts of outfits suggested by the players, from soccer and baseball gear to nurse and flight attendant uniforms, the Cash In had become like a cosplay showcase for Akane. No matter what item he produced, her appearance would only weaken its gravity.

“Olgan, drink this...” Mynk held the vial up to Olgan’s mouth. “It looks like this thing might bind your soul, or something... But beggars can’t be choosers...”

(What does she think my items are!?) Resisting the urge to squabble, the

Demon Lord closed his eyes and inhaled smoke, which instantly cleared his mind.

“Olgan, this...!”

The Demon Lord hurriedly turned to them.

“It’s incredible...” Olgan muttered. The Demon Lord had mistakenly thought that the Neutralizer was a dud. However, color was even returning to Olgan’s face. She couldn’t believe the change her own body had undergone and was undergoing. “Am I dreaming...?” she muttered absent-mindedly. Even the old scales on her skin began falling off, restoring her original skin. All of the poison that had affected her and remained with her over the years was being neutralized as well. According to the Demon Lord, this too must have only been a natural effect of the item.

“Demon... Lord? What did you do? What did you make me give Olgan...!?”

“What are you talking about?” the Demon Lord snapped to attention. He too had been surprised that the item was negating the poison that had afflicted her all of her life.

“First, that curse water, now this...? Something’s wrong with you... The black phoenix, sealed within my right eye, knows this.”

“Black phoenix... You’re the one who has something wrong with them! And I told you, that was just water earlier!”

“How can you even say that!? Ever since I drank from it, the seal on my right hand has loosened, it’s not listening to me...”

Watching Mynk feebly grip her right hand, the Demon Lord gazed up at the ceiling, exasperated. While water from Mount Fuji and the Alps were popular in Japan, he couldn’t believe that those expensive bottles of water would be treated as a curse in this world. “What do you think of the famous Fuji Water? You owe Mount Fuji an apology.”

“What’s Mount Fuji...? Is that the name of some false god!?”

The Demon Lord let out a long sigh, and created yet another bottle of Fuji Water. He produced it in part because he wanted to defend Mount Fuji’s honor,

as well as give Olgan something to regain her strength. “Take this and rest in the corner,” he said as he handed it to her.

“Alright... I got it...” Without hesitation, Olgan poured some water in the ladle and drank from it. Mynk watched the exchange, flustered, before realizing that Olgan’s skin was rapidly recovering moisture and tautness, undoing the poison-tint. While Olgan had a more durable physique than humans did, her healing was still rapid, even by Firebrand standards.

“Hm. You clean up nice. You’ve practically got baby skin,” the Demon Lord remarked honestly, but not as eloquently as most women would have preferred their compliments.

Meanwhile, Olgan didn’t know what to say, and kept her head down without saying a word. Her discolored and clearly cursed and/or poisoned appearance had only ever prompted people to avert their eyes or cast her looks of disgust. Never before had anyone complimented her appearance.

Mynk misunderstood Olgan’s reaction, and began attempting to lift her spirits. “Stay strong, Olgan. I drank the water too, but he hasn’t taken my soul yet. We’ll overcome this trial together.”

“Mynk, this is just water... Except for its incredible healing capabilities.”

“That’s what that demon wants you to think! That’s how devils and con artists find an opening in your heart to shove their foot in!”

“You know I am technically a devil too, right...?”

Besides the two, the Demon Lord approached Belphegor, who had fallen silent and was visibly sulking, his shoulders low and back slouched. “You’re a lot quieter now,” the Demon Lord started. “Didn’t expect your little poison to be dealt with?”

“It was you...”

“Hm?”

“The flowers of fire in the night sky, the horns on my daughters head... You’re the creator of mysterious things. Who are you?”

“No need to ask. We’re going to part ways, soon enough.”

Despite the Demon Lord's cold shoulder, Belphegor couldn't help but be curious about this particular human. "I know of those called 'alchemists' who live to the west of the human lands. Are you one of them?"

"Alchemists? Sounds sketchy. Don't know any," said the sketchiest man in this entire world. Even so, the world of his creation was his core. He kept any outside elements and philosophies away, and never wavered his stance. In that sense, he was extremely static. For better or worse, he always remained the same in any situation against anyone. "I am who I am. I'll restore everything to this world and eliminate anyone like you who stands in my way."

"A human is still a human, no matter what mysterious powers they possess... Apparently you need some discipline. It would be my kingly duty to educate you on where you stand in this world."

"King? Someone thinks highly of themselves... Sure, I'll play with you." With a sly grin, the Demon Lord manually turned off Assault Queller. He feared that the feature would prevent him from even entertaining Belphegor.

Belphegor drew the sword from his waist and charged towards the Demon Lord, who dodged the sword with ease and slammed the back of his fist into the side of Belphegor's face. (Huh...?) Despite the perfect timing of the attack, it didn't seem like it had any effect.

Belphegor's eyes shifted, maliciously gleaming. "Good swing. It's almost a shame that you're a human."

"Hm..." The Demon Lord held Sodom's Fire by the hilt and poised it. While it was designed to be thrown, it could also be used in melee combat.

Belphegor elegantly swung his sword, as if he was dancing. "Humans are annoying... We can't even have a conversation without discipline first. Any self-respecting monster or devil can at least gauge their opponent's strength without fighting."

"Funny... Those words are going to haunt you." After parrying the sword attacks, the Demon Lord slashed Belphegor with Sodom's Fire once he found a split second of opening. However, there wasn't a scratch or even any damage, as far as the Demon Lord could tell, on the golden armor. "That armor isn't all show after all."

“Be careful!” Mynk shouted from the distance. She seemed to have taken Olgan away from the area once combat was initiated. “That armor blocks out all attacks and magic!”

The Demon Lord saw that Olgan was still on her back, and while she seemed far from fully recovered, she had already healed well enough to not be worried for her life.

At the same time, Belphegor gazed up, as if his fun had been spoiled. “Spoiling the trick already...? Humans really don’t know how to have fun.” Belphegor sulked again, lowering his sword. His playtime and the disciplinary action he was ready to administer had just lost much excitement. “It’s no use hiding it now... No attack nor magic will have any effect on me. Do you understand what that means?”

Without a word, the Demon Lord threw Sodom’s Fire. Despite it flying at incredible speed, the knife didn’t pierce the armor, as if it was protected by some unseen barrier. “Understand now? I am invincible. The unbeatable, infallible king. Kneel before me human, and use your powers to serve me. Swear your loyalty to me, and you will be spared from any admonishments.”

“Invincible *and* unbeatable...? You continue to bore me.”

“Is that a refusal...?”

“Just so you know, my world *of course* had armor that negated physical attacks or Chain Attacks. Some reduced or even negated the effects of skill attacks.”

“Human... What are you chirping on about?”

“Let me educate *you* on something. If I create one particular skill, I naturally have to create another skill that defeats it. A counter, if you will. Then, I need to make a counter for that skill, then another one for the next. A counter’s counter. This chain continues until there’s a zero-sum environment. In my world, it was one large circle.”

Belphegor nearly attacked the Demon Lord out of frustration, but found that he couldn’t move his feet. Watching the Demon Lord speak so brazenly made him hesitate for fear of some unexpected trick up his sleeve.

“Deciding where to use the limited resources of SP and money is at the core of it. One can reduce their weaknesses all around, or specialize in a specific area. The varied choices and infinite possibilities give the world depth and strategy. The small, self-sustaining circles, when combined, form an infinity sign.”

“Stop that grating yammering immediately.”

In lieu of compliance, the Demon Lord flicked the cigarette at Belphegor. It struck him square in the helmet and shook his body. While the action dealt no damage to the devil, it succeeded in insulting him. “The invincible hero of good has a certain charm...” the Demon Lord said. “But what charm does an invincible force of evil possess? Let me be frank. You’re... boring.” The Demon Lord laughed and lit yet another cigarette.

Despite still suspecting a trap, Belphegor had heard enough. He spread his wings wide and generated twenty Dark Spheres in the air. While each of them was a class-2 spell, it required an incredible amount of magic to create so many.

Even still, the Demon Lord didn’t bat an eye. “Just so you know, *I’m* not invincible. I prepared plenty of weapons and skills that could minimize my stats, reduce my HP, and deal astronomical damage to me. What’s the point of a final boss that can’t be beat?”

“I told you to shut up...! Multiplied: Dark Sphere!” The spheres soared at the Demon Lord, exploding around him, one after another. Each blast damaged the Demon Lord and tore at his clothes. “Puny bug... Looks like you were all talk after all.” Belphegor created numerous more Dark Spheres, ready to steadily strike at the Demon Lord without giving him a chance to strike back. Who could withstand a rapid-fire onslaught of this caliber? Even now, the Demon Lord was immobile, save for replacing the cigarette blow away by this attack.

“After how much you’ve insulted me, don’t expect an easy... death...” Belphegor noticed, at this moment, that the clothes of the ‘puny bug’ before him were rapidly restoring themselves. Moreover, the blood on his forehead and the cut on his cheek were nowhere to be seen. “You worm... Begone!” Belphegor shouted, firing off another storm of Dark Spheres. While they appeared to deal damage to the Demon Lord, his wounds, as well as his clothes,

continued to rapidly heal. “What... trickery is this!? What are you doing!?”

“I wonder how the log looks...” The Demon Lord tried opening the Combat Results, which he had disabled shortly after coming to this world. His brain was filled with a rapid flood of text:

Dark Sphere dealt 13 damage! Survival Skill: Meditate! Restored 18 HP! Restored durability of all armor! Dark Sphere dealt 18 damage! Survival Skill: Meditate! Restored 12 HP! Restored durability of all armor! Dark Sphere dealt 16 damage! Survival Skill: Meditate! Restored 27 HP! Restored durability of all armor!

Seeing the block of text in his mind, he began laughing. No matter the damage, he had healed just as much or even more after each hit. To add, the armor worn by the Demon Lord and his advisors all possessed infinite durability, keeping them from ever breaking.

“You kept calling yourself ‘king’ or ‘king of devils’ as if you were some final boss. Like I said, an undefeatable final boss is pointless... As is one that’s *too easy* to defeat, of course.” The Demon Lord put even another cigarette in his mouth, and continued prattling as if he was tutoring a struggling student. “A worthy final boss is one who can only be defeated when the best of the best players from around the globe, the legendary and almost omnipotent ones who provided the world with infinite possibilities and choices, come together as one. You want my two cents? Someone like you who keeps barking that they’re invincible with barely any power to show for it is no final boss, nor a king of any worth. At best, you’re the comedic relief that shows up halfway through the main quest,” the Demon Lord rattled off, spitting as if he had greased his tongue with insults beforehand.

“I had never expected an insect to make me so angry... There won’t be a *shred* left of you.” Belphegor closed the distance between them and swung his sword with a battlecry. The longsword cut through the air at blinding speed, but never reached the Demon Lord. A honeycomb-shaped barrier had blocked the blade.

“What...?”

“By defeating the final boss, you overturn the entire world and bring it to an

end. Usually, a one-of-a-kind hero's the one cut out for the job. You have no right to stand before me!" The Demon Lord grabbed Belphegor's head, and threw him against the wall with unbelievable strength. The strange bull and bed that were placed against the wall shattered to pieces.

Belphegor stood, quaking with humiliation. While he hadn't taken any damage, he couldn't imagine a shame worse than being tossed by a human as if he was a rag doll. "You... maggot!"

"I'll show what a true final boss is, in lieu of a farewell. Admin Feature: Debug Mode, Reduced HP, Field: Electric Colosseum." Just as those cryptic words left the Demon Lord's lips, the room was filled with black fog, which concentrated around him and formed an ominous whirl.

"What... is this...? What is happening!?" Belphegor knew that this was a crisis. More accurately, he was standing before a creature that didn't belong here.

As if the laws of the world were bent to the Demon Lord's will, their surroundings changed in an instant.

"Olgan... W-W-W-We're...!"

"Hm... So this is the 'old world' he kept talking about..."

They were in the middle of a digitally-created enormous Colosseum that boasted unbelievable size and an audience of hundreds of thousands, all cheering. These were God's People, the citizens of the Empire. Generated by top-notch technology, everyone in the crowd looked real, even their outfits shimmering bright. Many in the crowd held fans, glow sticks and banners with the Nine logo on it. Some even had 'Nine' or 'Hakuto' tattooed somewhere on their body. The cheer of the audience was earsplitting. This was one of the stages designed by Akira Ono, meant to blow any invading players out of the water while fully claiming the home field advantage. There were indeed countless players who were thrown into this field, only to stand in awe of their surroundings before being immediately destroyed by the Demon Lord of the Empire.

"What is this place...? I was in... my castle..." Belphegor muttered, and faltered from the overwhelming digital world around him.

A mocking voice came from the black whirl. “Bel... What was it again? Welcome to *my world* .” His voice had changed to that of Hakuto Kunai, befitting of the tyrant who soaked the world in blood. The black whirl spun faster, blurring the Demon Lord’s silhouette. The crowd went wild, their cheers roaring and eventually forming a collective tsunami of sound waves. The crowd chanted “Ku-nai! Ku-nai!” as they clapped their hands and stomped their feet in unison. Imagine a stadium filled to the brim with the most hardcore fans of a single team.

Belphegor looked to and fro, his ears assaulted by the earsplitting cheers, and his throat became parched. Before the fight had even resumed, Belphegor’s senses were overtaken.

“You kept calling me a bug... Would you care to do it again?” The black whirl subsided, revealing the Demon Lord in a completely different look. His signature long black hair and eyebrows were dyed white, and his eyes had changed to ruby red. His skin was now porcelain white, and he appeared younger, about thirty years old. His outfit had changed from his long coat and suit to an edgier iteration: his neck was covered with a large feather scarf, and he wore a medieval royal outfit under a large black cape. In short, he was a vampire lord. With his HP halved, the Demon Lord of the Empire took his true form, one he only revealed during a final battle.



“What the...? What are you...? What are you!?” Belphegor shouted, overcome with confusion.

The Demon Lord answered in his usual tone. “It’s only natural for a final boss to change its form and evolve. As a creator, I made sure to always include this sort of *tradition* .”

This was one of the gimmicks that Akira Ono had built into the Game, and an important reveal that showed players that the HP of the final boss had reached 50%. That being said, the Demon Lord had only ever been in this form twice before. The first was when he had barely defended the Sleepless Castle after all of his advisors except Ren Miyaoji had been defeated, and the second was during the fateful battle in 2016 when the Sleepless Castle fell.

(This reminds me of her...) The Demon Lord couldn’t help but smile from nostalgia as he recalled the distant past when he created a certain NPC. But he couldn’t relish his nostalgia for long.

——Triggered Duel Skill: Tyrant!

(+66 to Attack, Defense, and Dexterity. +666 Max HP. Negate all defensive effects. All attacks directly hit all targets. Temporary.)

As the Tyrant skill triggered, as it did during both of the previous final battles, a black fog composed of the spirits of the dead emerged from below the Demon Lord’s feet. That sight alone filled Belphegor with fear. Then the eye of the Demon Lord’s ring emitted a sinister glow as the mist changed shape from spirits to skeletons, appearing like it was merging with the Demon Lord of the Empire. Soon, the Demon Lord’s mind tumbled down long and hard into himself.

He found a world divided into black and white. An ordinary Japanese man stood on the white side, and Kunai on the black side. The line between them blurred, overlapping the minds of the Demon Lord and Kunai. (That’s right. I’m you. And you’re me.) The present and the past overlapped, entangled, and melted into each other in his tumbling mind. He felt an indescribable release.

When he opened his eyes, they glowed a violent red. The Demon Lord of the Empire no longer stood there, but rather Akira Ono, the true final boss, in his

place. “Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Now this feels great!”

Belphegor seemed to grasp the final boss’ strength from that cackle alone. “W-Wait... human!” he squeezed out. “Let us talk, discuss for a moment...! Let us talk!” Belphegor pleaded with the unbelievably violent presence before faltering. Without a sound, his right leg had been torn off. Just as Sodom’s Fire clinked to the ground, Belphegor fell like a log. “G-Grahhhhhh! M-My leg!” Belphegor writhed on the ground and agony overcame him. His personal hell, however, had just begun. Black flames erupted from his wound, which began to spread to his entire body. Belphegor screamed.

“Bah ha ha ha ha! Now that’s what I call a dumpster fire!” The Demon Lord’s taunt erupted the digital audience in thunderous cheers and applause. The battle had turned into an execution. “How does it feel to be toyed with by a *bug*? Why don’t you pick up your sword and try striking me, if you don’t like it? Do that, and this world will disappear, too.”

“Grah...! You *are* a bug!” Belphegor spread his wings and flew high into the air. With one leg gone, he was forced to be aerial. He spread his arms and began using every drop of Stamina he had. “I-I am the next King of Devils! I will *not* lose to a puny human!”

“Puny human, huh...? I’ll tell you this. Someone like you who hides behind tacky armor, enslaves people, and abuses their own daughter... A piece of shit like you will never overturn *my world* ...!” With a soul-shaking growl, the Demon Lord threw Sodom’s Fire at maximum strength. The immense energy contained in the attack caused the black meteor to draw a line in the air, as if cutting through the sky itself. With the Tyrant modifier, the attack caused a blinding explosion upon striking Belphegor’s armor, shaking the ground below. Belphegor blew into pieces, and black ash rained down on the arena. The Demon Lord produced a cigar this time, gracefully slicing and lighting it. Enjoying its top-shelf aroma, the Demon Lord bellowed out a puff of smoke. “Nothing more than a filthy firework...”

The digital crowd went wild in celebration of the Demon Lord’s victory. Confetti began falling from the sky and fanfares rang. This entire arena was dedicated to the Nine, the Demon Lord’s fanatic fans.

“How... could this... be...?”

“Oh, there’s still a piece left.”

Belphegor’s head, or more accurately, just his helmet, lay on the ground. It was a much too pathetic ending for the undefeatable king.

“Have... mercy...”

“Mercy...?”

“Just this once... If you and...”

“If you understood what that meant, Olgan wouldn’t have suffered like she did. I don’t subscribe to ‘do I as I say and not as I do.’” The Demon Lord exhaled a plume of smoke. His red eyes were glaring at Belphegor like he was the insect scurrying on the ground.

“Wait... Just once! Just one chance, have mercy...!”

“Another thing. The Demon Lord of the Empire knows no mercy.” The Demon Lord raised his foot. His expression was as unapproachable as an arctic glacier. “I have nothing of the sort for a piece of shit like you...!” He stomped Belphegor’s head, which was obliterated without a trace, his dying breath sounding like a frog’s croak.

Sensing that the fight was over, the jumbo screen brightly lit up with the name of the victor.

Hakuto Kunai WINS!

Unending applause and cheers enveloped the arena, while enormous fireworks in all colors of the rainbow illuminated the sky. Olgan and Mynk, who had been watching the fight, let out a gasp in amazement at the glimmering sight.

“I never expected the days of old to be so glamorous...” Olgan said, entranced.

“More like the world of light than darkness...” Mynk complained.

The digital world, and all of its glitz and glamor, gradually crumbled into fragments of numbers and symbols. Even the sight of the world dissipating like

sand in the wind exuded a certain beauty.

The party found themselves again in an empty cave, and everyone there could feel that their war had come to an end.

Olgan approached the Demon Lord as he contentedly puffed white smoke and grabbed the end of his cape. “I’m sorry. I completely relied on you until the end.”

“Don’t worry about it...” The Demon Lord looked the other way. His anger had somewhat faded, and he was beginning to question his action of stomping Olgan’s father to death while she watched.

“Now my nightmare is over. I can’t thank you enough.”

As the Demon Lord was thinking of how to respond, the long-awaited sound of an unlocked Admin feature rang in his head. “Hwah! Here we go...!”

“Wh-What’s the matter!?”

“I-I mean...” The Demon Lord cleared his throat. “I need some time to myself to think over—”

“I knew it!” A loud voice called from a distance. “Your looks’ve changed, Hakuto!” Akane was standing there, pointing at the Demon Lord. “You always do the fun stuff when I’m away!”

“It wasn’t exactly *fun* .”

“Woah! Your voice changed, too!? I like it just as much! A silver fox turned bad-boy vampire! Hey, hey! You ever want to drink blood!?”

“That’s disgusting, why would I ever...?”

“Oh, I get it! You only like virgin blood, right!?”

“You really want me to drink blood, don’t you...?”

“Ooh! You’re going to drink my blood, Hakuto!? That’s kind of hot now that I think about it!”

As the two bickered, Olgan silently tugged on his cape. Her expression made it perfectly clear how unhappy she was. “We’re done here. Let’s go to the treasury.”

“W-Wait a minute... I want to be alone for a second,” the Demon Lord muttered as Olgan began pulling him away. He wanted to take his time and see which feature had been unlocked. He couldn’t exactly show how excited he was with all these people around.

“Oh, right! I went over there, and there was this weird little brat who took so much of the treasure... My B, Hakuto! These are all I got.” Akane apologized, putting her hands together. Then, she showed him the select few treasures that she was able to acquire. The pile included some sort of seed, a gem, a sculpture, and a book.

Olgan flashed a slight look of relief. “This one is Amanda’s Seed. It temporarily increases your resistance to magic. This jewel is Amanda’s Stone. Prevents status conditions... only up to class-2 spells, though. I assume the sculpture is just a piece of art.”

“This will do for now,” the Demon Lord nodded in satisfaction, and turned to the book. It featured a familiar dog on the cover, titled *The Adventures of Spot the Destroyer-Dog, Vol.6*. “This book again... Why was this in the treasury?”

“This is the mythical sixth volume. I didn’t expect it to be in this castle, either.”

“Oh well. It’ll be a souvenir for Aku...” The Demon Lord stored the treasures in his Item Folder and placed his cigar into a dedicated ashtray. Then, something moved at the corner of his eye. “What the...?”

“Ooh, such sparkly armor!” Akane cheered.

Belphegor’s armor was slowly regenerating. (Does that metal have infinite durability too...?) he wondered, though no one but him and his advisors should have had such a thing.

“Hey, hey. Can I take it?”

The Demon Lord chuckled at Akane’s innocent request. While Akane was a sucker for all treasure, this was technically a keepsake for Olgan. “That’s yours, Olgan.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but no. I’d always be on edge if I had that thing around.”

“That makes sense...” the Demon Lord acknowledged, and Akane celebrated by thrusting a fist in the air. This was a nice find, a very ‘treasure-y’ treasure, after missing out on almost everything in the treasury. Just to be sure, the Demon Lord performed Analyze Item by holding his hand over the armor. He would only be able to read the item’s name from it, but he decided it would be better than nothing. “Analyze Item... Huh? ‘Final Exam’...? What kind of name is that?”

“Pfft! The little guy’s called ‘Final Exam’!? That’s kind of cute!” Akane proclaimed.

“But, Hakuto. There was a bunch a white powder under the castle, too.” Akane added, and The Demon Lord frowned at the notion. That wasn’t something in line with this fantasy world. Akane seemed slightly worried about how the Demon Lord would react. “What should we do...?”

“Blow it up with the rest of the castle. Can’t be bothered to try and get rid of it on our own.”

“Mm hm... There are a bunch of gross things around here, too. Let’s light ‘em up!”

“I’ll take care of it,” the Demon Lord nonchalantly said. “Take them all outside.”

Akane happily nodded. Her eyes showed that she was assured of something. “Let’s go, Caped Girl!”

“H-Hey...”

“Wakey wakey, Edgequeen!”

“Huh...? I’m tired, let me sleep... Today was all a dream. It had to be...”

“Eggs and bakey!” Humming a tune, Akane quickly grabbed the two and vanished.

After seeing that all of them were gone, the Demon Lord Quick Traveled to the ground floor of the castle. While that was another glamorous room, there was no sign of life, which seemed to embody the masterless castle. “No sense keeping such an eyesore of an enemy base lying around...” A shadow emerged

from the ground below him, extending outward until it reached the outer wall of the castle. The shadow shifted its shape into a scythe-wielding reaper.

—Special Ability: Shadow Edge!

With that call, the scythe swung in an arc in the span of a blink, slicing the castle straight across. This was an ability dedicated to the Demon Lord, an AOE attack unleashed at the end of the combo. While it dealt a comparatively modest 50 damage, its range was incredibly wide, and it even included a knockback effect. Since the final boss often fought against a crowd, Akira Ono had designed this move to clear his surroundings of foes. With the Tyrant modifier on top of it, its range easily covered the entire castle. As the building began crumbling down, the Demon Lord Quick Traveled out of range of the debris, where he could watch it fall with the rest of his party.

“I can’t believe that giant castle is falling...” Mynk muttered in awe, while Olgan silently stared. Perhaps she wanted to destroy the castle herself, if she could have. The Demon Lord, too, watched the destruction with some sentiment in his eyes.

“Down it goes...” Akane said as she stood beside him, holding her hands behind her back. Her eyes were searching for the emotion behind the Demon Lord’s eyes.

“A castle is worthless without its master. Let it fall with one last show.”

“Mm-hm...”

With a sound that resembled a scream, the walls all came down. The floor below caved in, unable to bear the weight of the rubble above, the heap of debris repeatedly collapsing into the ground, one level of the catacombs after another in an unstoppable chain reaction. The ceiling, the walls, the elaborate staircase, the lights, the flowers, the paintings, the torture instruments, and any remaining monsters were all being buried beneath a torrent of rubble. In fact, in a way, it looked like a mountain had sunk into the ground.

“Hakuto... I’m going on an adventure now.”

“What are you talking about? We’re going back to the village—”

“You’ve got Tahara and Yu. I want to do a job that only I can do. Is that okay?”

The Demon Lord pondered for a moment. In fact, Akane was better suited for excavation, espionage, and attacking locations as a second unit. She wasn't the type to be content sitting in a village. "Guess that's better suited for you... Oh, and take these back." The Demon Lord produced the Moon Shoes from his Item Folder and handed them to Akane. He told her to watch what she ate, to be careful against magic, to use the golden armor if push came to shove... Like he was a teacher reminding his student, who was too excited to pay attention, the important details before a field trip. "And I don't mind where you go, but be ready to answer a Communication from me."

"Ugh. I like *making* calls, not taking them."

"What are you, a child!? Oh, you are..."

"Now, I'm off to find treasure and take names! See ya, Caped Girl! Edgequeen! Peace out! Yee-haw! Adventure awaits!" With a perfect salute and a wave to Olgan and Mynk, Akane disappeared. She always seemed to come and go like a storm.

"And she's gone..." Mynk muttered. "What are you going to do, Olgan?"

She didn't answer, but turned to the Demon Lord. She truly had no plan after fighting her father. "What should we do?"

"Why are you asking me...?" the Demon Lord snarled. How could he show anyone the way, when he was going through this world like a chicken with its head cut off?

"Is there anything you want me to do? I'll do anything, if I'm capable of it."

"What were your plans for after all this, anyway?"

"I did have an investigation quest from Xenobia. I haven't responded yet."

Hearing this, the Demon Lord tilted his head. He had heard the name of that country from Tahara quite often. He recalled the woman dressed like a bizarre ninja. "Oh, the country of that ninja... Why don't you go there?" The Demon Lord casually encouraged her, as if he was sending her off to a destination like the Iga Village Mokumoku Farm, a farm-restaurant-hotel located in Mie prefecture.

Oblivious to any tourist destinations in modern Japan, Olgan simply agreed. “Understood. We’ll head to Xenobia.”

“Right...” The Demon Lord couldn’t help but be taken aback by Olgan’s look, which was completely trusting of him. (I did kill this girl’s father...) The Demon Lord was hung up on that thought. Even though Olgan had *asked* him to do it, this con artist was feeling the tug of whatever little conscience he had.

“Demon Lord, have you ever wanted a child?”

“What?” the Demon Lord blurted at the completely unexpected topic. Then, he saw the emotions in Olgan’s eyes, and said with ostentatious gravitas, “I told you, I’m single. Never even crossed my mind.” The Demon Lord fluttered his cape and produced another cigar from his pocket, using his cat’s eye cutter to prep it. He slowly lit the cigar hoping to brush this particular topic under the rug, but Olgan fired off another shot at the Demon Lord’s back.

“I want a child. One truly loved by their parents.”

“R-Really... That’s an admirable thought amidst the declining population...” The Demon Lord mumbled some nonsense and sucked on his cigar. What else could he have done? As sweat poured down his forehead, a surprising but welcome aid arrived.

“Hey, Olgan! What are you talking about!?”

“Exactly what I’m saying, Mynk.”

“You’ve been brainwashed from that cursed water, and your horns...! This man is the Fallen Angel Lucifer, the *epitome* of evil! The evil star that will bring destruction to this land!”

Even as the Demon Lord felt relief, he felt dizzy after learning that he was being called an ‘evil star.’ (What did I do to deserve that...!? Wait, maybe it’s not entirely uncalled for...?) Seeing that he had drastically altered the landscape before them by obliterating a grand devil and his castle, the name was fitting. Even as the Demon Lord toiled with this thought in his mind, the two continued.

“If I bear the Demon Lord’s child... They’ll probably become one of the best Spellcasters on the continent. As a mother, I would remain firm but kind to—Hrm!”

“Say no more! Words alone could get you pregnant! Think about it, his voice always lingers in your ear... That’s right! He’s trying to impregnate us through our ears to brainwash us!”

(‘Impregnate us through our ears’...? What the hell is she talking about!?) The Demon Lord could no longer bear the outlandish accusations, and created a particular item. He wanted to gift Olgan something after she had lost her father, especially since giving her a child was out of the question. “I’ll give you this, Olgan.”

“What... is this...?”

The Demon Lord had produced a black outfit, spending 50 SP in the process. Whether he had intended to or not, the outfit too carried important weight.

“During the battle in the Sleepless Castle, this outfit was given to those who forsook everything and chose our side.”

“‘Chose your side’...?”

“Men were given the uniform of the Imperial Knights, and women the uniform of the Valkyrie. It has a nice defense of 35, too.” Without much of an explanation, the Demon Lord handed Olgan the outfit, as if she was always destined to wear it.

While the Demon Lord hadn’t offered much context, his words allowed for Olgan and Mynk to imagine various aspects of his world. Now, Mynk shook in anger. Her concerns were coming to life before her very eyes. “Let’s go, Olgan! We can’t be with him... The more time we spend with him, the worse our minds and bodies will be turned! You won’t make a fool out of me, Demon Lord!”

“Calm down, Mynk... I—”

“We’re going!” Picking Olgan up, Mynk ran off like she was protecting her daughter from a wolf.

The Demon Lord could only chuckle. (Now, that was a rambunctious crowd... But I got what I wanted, so I’ll call this a win.) He inhaled the smoke from his cigar as he looked at the land where a castle once stood. He could almost see the Sleepless Castle standing there. Even that high-tech grand fortress fell after fifteen years. “I suppose any world changes when a castle falls.”

While the Demon Lord was thinking of his world in the past, the world he currently occupied had also changed this day, unbeknownst to him. Belphegor would have ruled over the entirety of Hellion territory, waged war against humanity, and brought catastrophic warfare to the continent. But, in any world, history is not written with 'would have's.' Belphegor, who would have scarred a large portion of history with his name, was destroyed this day. This world would change even more drastically, naturally due to the Demon Lord and his advisors, as long as he remained resolved to restore all of his world and his features...

The Demon Lord opened his Admin screen and burst out laughing as he read the text. "Bah ha ha ha ha ha! Perfect! Absolutely perfect!" He began slapping his knee and giggling like a child. He looked like he was about to begin dancing in joy.

Congratulations!

Through enough activity... You unlocked Area Construction.

Area Construction: Pool — 500pt

Area Construction: Beach — 300pt

Area Construction: Lighthouse — 500pt

Area Construction: Marina — 5000pt

Area Construction: Water Park — 5000pt (+ Payment)

Area Construction: Forest — 5000pt (+ Payment)

Area Construction: Quarry — 20000pt (+ Additional Requirements)

Area Construction: Mine — 20000pt (+ Additional Requirements)

Area Construction: Apartment Complex — 3000pt (+ Minimum Population)

The Demon Lord read the nostalgic block of text a few times over. Just reading the words seemed to content him, in contrast to what came out of his mouth next. "I don't know if there's a god in this world... But nothing can stop me now!" With the flutter of his cape, the Demon Lord Quick Traveled to recover the Hideout, along with the little princess within it.

Once he was gone, silence came over the old castle grounds illuminated by

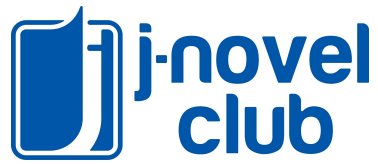
the morning sun. Whether the Demon Lord could be called a natural or man-made disaster, one of the Seven Original Sins, Belphegor, was destroyed. This day marked a dramatic change in the forces within Hellion territory, which would soon affect Animania and the human nations. In a very literal sense, the world was changed.

Postscript Thank you very much for picking up Volume 5. Kurone Kanzaki, the author, here. I've been addressed by my pen name so much recently that I nearly forgot my real name. How have you been doing these days?

We finally got Volume 5 out! I'm terribly sorry for the wait. The Japanese volume should come out around the end of February. Hopefully those still attending school have survived the *horrible* custom of chocolate-giving during Valentine's Day. Back when I was in school, there was this tendency to shame anyone who didn't get even a single chocolate. I wonder if things have changed at all... Of course, once you're an adult, there won't be any chocolates hidden in your desk, and no blushing girl will come see you after school and give you a pack of hand-made anything. Enjoy your golden years, teens! Before you're tossed out into the workforce.

This volume consisted of the charge into Hellion territory, so I hope you've enjoyed these characters in action. All of the Hellions they encountered were dangerous beings that would have threatened the entire human race had they decided to cross the border. While the Demon Lord and Akane had each taken out a formidable Hellion with ease, corners of this world outside of the Demon Lord's vision are still riddled with cruelty and misery. Stick around to find out how the constantly-misunderstood Demon Lord deals with further threats and enemies. Since this storyline took up quite a number of pages, I was unable to fit any flashbacks in this volume. I hope to write more of those in future volumes. Look forward to finding out the answers to questions like "What happened to the real world?" "Why did Akira Ono turn into the Demon Lord?" "How are this fantasy world and the Game related?" "What are the Demon Lord and Akira 'retrying'?"

Finally, thank you to my wonderful illustrator Ino, the amazing manga artist Minotake, everyone at Futabasha, everyone related to the project, and of course, thank you to my readers. See you at the end of Volume 6!



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Demon Lord, Retry! Volume 5

by Kurone Kanzaki

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Edited by Jack Diaz

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5